



# LAURA'S AURA

JEAN CLAUDE CASTEX

*For anyone who loves discovering unusual worlds.*



# LAURA'S AURA

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*To my lovely Aleia*



This royal residence took on the air of a mansion with its four Ionian columns surmounted by an architrave carved with Greco-Roman motifs. The whole framed a monumental entrance door that operated electrically. It was one of those private "cathedrals" in which the *nouveau riche* like to take up residence to convince themselves that they have risen far from the populace, far above ordinary mortals. [Rods, p.9]

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**Rods**

In life, everything might be better if we were granted a second chance: a poorly judged turn ending against a cypress, an exam flunked through lack of preparation, or a blind date too thrilling to avoid culminating in the bondage of motherhood. Yet, that's not always the case.

If you need convincing, just count the number of marriages —or matrimonial entanglements, more broadly— that the average man or woman experiences in this twenty-first century : three, give or take. And that's not counting the multitude of false starts, the romantic fender-benders that end up in the ditches of life.

Arthur's story will make the point better than any statistic. He was a brilliant lawyer in Vancouver. For the first ten years of his career, he served the province's *Workers' Compensation Board*. Or more accurately, he orchestrated a thousand sleights of hand, underhanded tactics, and morally questionable maneuvers to deny compensation to workers injured on the job —compensation they were owed under the frugal terms of the *Provincial Labour Code*. A code, it should be said, shaped and reshaped by the miserly hands of iron-fisted capitalists.

These captains of industry, perpetually on guard against being "*taken hostage*" by a malingering laborer claiming a fraudulent disability pension, poured money into this bureaucratic watchdog. The Board's job, in practice, became hunting down fraudsters — so zealously, in fact, that real victims were routinely denied aid. Not just because of the cheaters who polluted the system, but also due to the bosses who cynically exploited those abuses as an excuse to stonewall legitimate claims.

Arthur, on occasion, would pass a doorway reeking of urine and despair and glimpse a misshapen, foul-smelling vagrant. He would feel, briefly, a pang of responsibility for their descent. But he'd quickly turn his head to avoid recognition —or perhaps guilt— and drive such treacherous thoughts from his mind, too dangerous for his conscience and too corrosive to his ego.



## *Laura's aura*

Eventually, this internal disquiet —never spoken aloud, but gnawing at his sense of honor— spurred him toward redemption. He resolved to reclaim the pride once tied to his old oath : *the protector of widows and orphans*. An ideal long since drowned beneath the floodwaters of easy money — money, it must be said, rarely possessed by either widows or orphans.

But now Arthur was a master of the *Workers' Compensation Board's* legal chicanery. He knew their tricks inside and out — how they spent eight-tenths of their budget on lawyers to silence victims and deny them basic human rights. Armed with this insider knowledge, he left the WCB and set up his own practice, this time to defend those very same victims whose life had been ruined by a work accident, even if his *Oath of Ethics* no longer made it an ideal for the last five decades, eaten away and disfigured by the greedy *Globalism* that the *Great International Financiers* had erected as the *Supreme Deity*.

Of course, this noble calling conveniently paid handsomely. Defending the downtrodden made for great business. Like those pseudo-humanitarians who dine lavishly at benefit galas for world hunger, Arthur managed to appear as a modern-day Las Casas, a Gandhi, a Mandela — or maybe even a Louis Riel— while discreetly padding his own pockets.



In his battles for and against Dame Justice, Arthur had been so Machiavellian that when he announced his separation from Julie, his girlfriend, the consensus among friends and relatives alike was that the poor girl was bound to “*lose her blouse*.” But certainty is a luxury reality rarely affords. The butcher, after all, ends up gnawing on scraps, and the village cobbler is always the worst shod.

Arthur may have fought like a lion — twisting the truth, contorting clarity, discrediting witnesses, tilting jurors' perceptions and even bending the judges' sense of reason. His every maneuver, admirable in its precision if not for the sheer cunning behind it, had

earned him quiet awe and louder suspicion. Yet for all his stratagems and courtroom wizardry, he was ultimately compelled to pay Julie an alimony fit for a queen.

To add insult to injury —and to thoroughly salt his gaping wound— Canadian law saw fit to grant her not only this princely pension but also half of his bank assets and investments. These included sums discreetly nestled in *tax havens* slyly overseen by the ever-clever Kingdom of Great Britain, which seemed to take national pride in facilitating tax evasion for foreign elites.

Thus, Arthur's secret accounts —long hidden from the sniffing bloodhounds of Canadian taxation, infamous for their ruthless pursuit of the poor and their gentle touch with the rich— were finally smoked out and laid bare.

Julie congratulated herself on having carefully noted, as a preventive measure, all the illegal accounts which sheltered these fraudulent funds as well as the illicit investments intended to constitute a comfortable pension in favor of her partner.

Long before breaking her affair, she had opened a "*Heritage file*" that highlighted all the property of her companion so as not to find herself as devoid as the cicada when the kiss of dissensions, clashes, and finally, the break, would inevitably begin to blow.

More than the fraudulent investments, the couple's primary residence remained the most obvious, unbreakable stumbling block. Neither antagonist wanted to abandon it to the other. This royal residence took on the air of a mansion with its four Ionian columns surmounted by an architrave carved with Greco-Roman motifs. The whole framed a monumental entrance door that operated electrically. It was one of those private "cathedrals" in which the *nouveau riche* like to take up residence to convince themselves that they have risen far from the populace, far above ordinary mortals.

For Julie and Arthur, the early kiss had swelled into a storm. The question now was *who* would keep the magnificent White Rock estate — spacious as a basilica, its broad bay windows seeming to dream in peace as they gazed out over the vast Gulf of Semiahmoo.

Julie, who had already secured a generous alimony and claimed half of her ex-companion's impressive pension, naturally wished to appropriate the property with the most exquisite bad faith imaginable — even though the manor had long been part of his family's heritage. His grandfather had built it at great expense in 1914, having received the land as a subscription bonus from *BC Magazine*<sup>1</sup>.

With death in her soul, Julie had been forced to relinquish this panorama — one she knew she'd never afford again. She had loved watching the Pacific in spring and fall, tracking the great migrations of whales and sperm whales as they passed between the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska. These enormous creatures paused in the bay, just beyond her windows, feeding in the shoals, resting— while their calves surfaced all around her, releasing sighs of steam into the salt air.

Without any haste, her eyes coldly riveted on the sea — an impossibly deep blue, dotted here and there with sheep-like toupees of silver foam, Julie was desperately plotting how to make this residence hers. At times, she packed with spite, boxing up personal belongings into cardboard crates, trunks, and suitcases she'd had the foresight to keep from the very beginning of her affair with Arthur, just in case...

She knew all too well that in our rapidly decaying post-industrial society, marriages lasted statistically only a handful of

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<sup>1</sup>The ancestor of today's *BC Magazine* appeared in 1907. It ceased publication during the First World War, in 1915. The magazine distributed (as a subscription bonus) land in *White Rock*, which today is worth millions of dollars. The goal was to populate the Canada-U.S. border.

years. Passion flared like a brush fire —intense, brief, and gone within weeks — giving way to a routine that soured into arguments, and eventually, separation. Even their dog, Coco, who hated when his parents fought, would rush in frantic cuddles the moment voices were raised. But even he had grown used to it, in his own dogged despair.

Amid these immense crowds, abandoned by disoriented gods who demand irrational acts from their overly gullible followers, everyone strives to savor earthly life to the fullest—before sinking into Nothingness, now that the long-promised Garden of Delights has vanished. This is the new dogma: everything must be done to ensure that this one-way existence is crowned with success and happiness.

In the event of separation, one must be both clever and aggressive —while giving the impression of passivity—, like a poor victim playing defense. In the past, Destiny flowed for each person like "a long, peaceful river." Divorce was so difficult to obtain, and so morally condemned, that one had to invent a noble excuse for submission, enduring for a lifetime the straitjacket of marriage. Religions —ever fertile in the art of affliction and resignation— made abundant use of Paradise and eternal Hell to tame and subjugate dissenters and the defiant. They attributed a convenient and supposedly redemptive spiritual value to the injustice, suffering, and misfortune endured by the poor, so long as they agreed not to rebel against the established order.

Immersed in subversive thoughts, Julie spent nearly an hour each day packing her belongings — stretching the task as long as possible to savor the view that made her heart sing and her melancholy ache. From time to time, she sighed, her chest rising—a beautiful pair of breasts that had cost her dearly to implant, but had handsomely repaid the investment; a hundredfold return, she mused... dividends in alimony and spoils.

But eventually, one must submit to the pitchforks of Justice—and to the movers. They arrived one morning, punctual and indifferent, to haul away her personal effects and the few pieces of furniture legally hers.

Only after they had gone, did Julie reach into a crumpled paper bag and pull out the ingredients for her final feast at White Rock : shrimp, caviar, lobster — decadence laid out like a sacrament. She uncorked half a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, that golden nectar, each sip conjuring a whisper of paradise.

Settled in the center of the vast balcony, she savored both the view and the seafood, her senses lulled by the languid strains of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. In her mind's eye, she wore the face of poor Odette —radiant, cursed— pursued by her cruel lover turned predator, the sorcerer Von Rothbart, sworn to turn her into a swan forever.

After indulging her palate with all these voluptuous delights, she returned to contemplating the magnificent Bay of Semiahmoo— its maternal hills gently rounding the horizon, dotted with multicolored houses and dark green coniferous forests mirrored in a fragment of the Pacific Ocean, bluer than the sky itself. The liquid gulf lay before her like an ancient chalice brimming with divine nectar.

Out near the buoys marking the Canada–U.S. border, diligent Vietnamese fishermen cast their crab cages into the sea and flung their nets with the broad, generous gesture of sowers. Here and there, sandy beaches littered with drifting logs fringed the Canadian coast and the white-faced American shore opposite.

Julie then embarked on a curious ritual. She lowered the curtain rod in the living room, unscrewed one of its openwork finials, inserted leftover seafood into the hollow tube, screwed it back together, and rehung the rod above the bay window. She repeated the same odd operation in every room of the house.

## *Laura's aura*

It was nearly midnight by the time she finished scrubbing the kitchen. Stepping out onto the porch, she locked the door under the pale glow of a streetlamp, then tossed the key through a small, ajar window on the first floor. That afternoon, she had thoughtfully made a copy.

Walking slowly toward her car, Julie drifted back to the happy days of their love affair, just a few years ago. But slightly as quickly, her memory turned to the moment she first met the man she now despised. She had once confided to a close friend that it wasn't love at first sight — it was his wealth, his pedigree, the gleaming lure of a life wrapped in legal privilege.

*These lawyers," she had scoffed, "they enrich themselves shamelessly — by exploiting people, by pitting human against human. If I ever manage to get my hands on his assets, it'll be the sweetest revenge. The thief robbed; the sprinkler sprayed..."*

*—So, you don't like him?"*

*—No! And I wonder how I ever could!"*

*—Security, perhaps? That's what people tell themselves. That's what justifies it."*

That's how tricksters absolve themselves — by projecting their own flaws onto their prey. Yet somehow, against all logic, the strange alchemy of love had worked. The deception had transformed — like a grimy caterpillar emerging as a radiant butterfly. What began as a calculated seduction of a lawyer had turned into a whimsical romance, a tender, delicious idyll, a divine prank of Providence.

*—We loved each other in the middle of a wheat field,* she used to say, her blue eyes sparkling like vintage Champagne.

*—I had Heaven at my fingertips.*

## *Laura's aura*

She would remember the golden wheat ears swaying like coins in the wind — sun-kissed and shimmering. *Louis d'or* scattered by the invisible hand of Pierre-Gaultier de La Vérendrye himself, their glow dancing above her, beneath an endless sky.

But love, like the Alberta rosehip, bloomed quickly—and withered just as fast. Their passion faded, then shriveled under the weight of mutual selfishness.

*—It's almost inevitable, she admitted once to her best friend. When you marry for the wrong reasons... like I did. Everyone gets stuck in a cocoon of resentment. Of hate. And there's no easy way out. Especially not when bad faith clouds everything.*

Here's a revised version with improved style, tone, and rhythm, keeping the dark humor and literary flair intact:

*—Ah!*

*—In the end, it was high time I left that man. I hate him now with such ferocity, such blazing contempt, that I almost regret not having borne him a child — just so I could accuse him of abusing him or her... Julie confessed.*

*—Oh?*

*—A friend told me it always works. And the satisfaction, she said, is immense — watching the man flounder under the weight of public scorn, cast out like a medieval leper, shunned as if excommunicated.*



The day after that pitiful departure, Arthur claimed the apartment. A locksmith came and changed the locks. But Arthur, in his usual fog of forgetfulness, neglected to change the WiFi password—a detail Julie exploited with glee. She had ordered a surveillance kit from Hong Kong that allowed her to spy on the

apartment through the television screen. Her technician, an expert in creative invasions of privacy, installed the system flawlessly.

But as always, curiosity punishes the curious.

Julie watched. Night after night, she saw Geraldine—the new companion—draped languidly across the leather couch beside Arthur. Julie seethed, foam gathering on her lips, as she watched the other woman artfully bind her former lover in silk cords of ecstasy, like a tarantula toying with a paralyzed green fly. Geraldine appeared to take divine pleasure in it. As for Arthur — best not to speak of him. He looked to Julie like a goose glazed in its own fat, clumsy and overindulged, honking idiotically through pleasure he didn't deserve.

Julie seethed, her face twisted in a sneer of hatred, her gaze locked on the scene with a single, unblinking eye. How could such a magnificent house have fallen into the clutches of *her* — Geraldine, a gold digger with a predator's grin?

For four or five days, the lovers reveled in their conquest. They performed the rites of passion on every surface — sofas, arm-chairs, tables, floors, counters — consecrating their unspeakable joy. For her, it was a perverse ecstasy : to claim and consume what others had earned through years of toil.

—*I never imagined she'd be so easy to drive out*, Arthur exclaimed one evening, basking in the afterglow of triumph.

—*I'm quite sure she shed tears of rage*, Geraldine added, sneering. *It seems her rancid little scent still lingers here!*

—*You are ineffable*, he said, laughing.

Julie nearly collapsed under the weight of her fury upon hearing those words. Ah, that *smell*! So faint at first, but growing stronger with each passing day. Arthur and Geraldine started with the obvious — opening windows. No result. They scrubbed,



scoured, waxed, polished, disinfected. Nothing. The odor clung to the house like guilt to a liar's soul.

They searched obsessively for the source: dead rats, decaying birds, rodents in forgotten corners — nothing. They crawled through malignant asbestos insulation in the attic, braving rusty nails, risking torn flesh and poisoned lungs. Every carpet, curtain, and tapestry was steam-cleaned. Pipes were purged with caustic soda and bleach, staining wood, fabric, and paper alike. Clumps of filthy hair were pulled from drains and thrown out with shudders and gagging mouths.

But the smell — like Cain's eye — remained, fixed and malevolent, an unshakable curse clinging to stone. They replaced every siphon. Installed air purifiers. Repainted walls. Still, nothing changed. Bowls of Coca-Cola were placed in every room. Several rats were killed.<sup>1</sup> Still the stench endured.

Two extermination companies came in succession. They smoked, sprayed, scrubbed like zealots battling a demon. And yet, within minutes, the smell returned — like unquenchable hatred in the heart of a madman.

The lovers stopped inviting guests. The housekeeper, wounded by veiled insults and unspoken suspicions, resigned. Finally, they abandoned the house and took refuge in a hotel, while movers packed everything and transported it to a sterile new home in South Surrey.

A real estate agent came promptly to assess the place. He found it —of all things— extraordinary.

*—You could easily get four million—maybe more—if you could just get rid of that rotten egg stench. It's everywhere. Can't you smell it?*

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<sup>1</sup> The soda, it seemed, suffocated them, since rats can't burp.

*Laura's aura*

—*No! Not really!* they lied, bold as brass.

—*Yes, you can! It's obvious. You'll never sell this place unless you scrub out that awful stink.*

They switched real estate agencies. Same result. No one would bite. In the end, they had to let the house go—for the price of the land alone. What despair. What now? And on top of everything, municipal and school taxes were bearing down on them like misery on the world's wretched. What else could they do?

It was on just such a dismal day that Julie called—precisely while Arthur and Geraldine were inside the house, listening to yet another real estate agent urging them to offload the place *fast*, and at the lowest price imaginable.

—*Hello? Is this Mr. Arthur Tremblay?*

Geraldine recognized the voice instantly. Julie. She nearly hung up on her, but hesitated.

—*Yes... Would you like to speak with him?*

—*Yes, please.*

She handed the receiver to Arthur.

—*Hello, Arth? I'm so sorry to bother you!*

—*You're not bothering me.*

—*Oh, thank you. You're very kind. I just wondered... you haven't, by chance, found a red earring? Maybe behind a couch, or somewhere like that? I can't seem to find it.*

—*Oh. No, sorry.*

—*Oh, that's a pity. I was very fond of it.*

—*I'm sorry. But the earring can't be in the house.*

—*Oh? Why not?*

*Laura's aura*

—*Because the house is completely empty. Only the legal fixtures are left.*

—*You mean... you moved?*

—*Yes. Geraldine—my new partner—doesn't care for the place. So, we're moving to Surrey.*

—*I see... You know, I always had a soft spot for that house. If you're really done with it — I'd be happy to take it off your hands.*

—*Wait a second.*

Arthur snatched the handset, and Julie could hear a chaotic exchange — a blend of whispers, shrieks, and sudden outbursts of voices.

—*I could do you this favor for two million... if you return the big camping truck.*

—*You're ruthless!*

—*That's how it is. Like it or not, that's the deal.*

—*Come on, can't we negotiate? Two million is insane!*

—*I'll check with Geraldine. Hold on.*

The line went quiet except for a low hum, then came the unmistakable stridulations of a woman's raucous laughter tearing through the static.

—*Hello, Julie?*

—*Yes?*

—*Alright. If the motorhome's still in great shape, we'll agree to sell you the house for a million and a half... but not a penny less.*

—*Okay, I accept. But you've cleaned me out, Arth !*

The transaction was hastily sealed that very afternoon. Arthur refused to let her visit the house — afraid she'd catch a whiff of *the smell*. Julie, for her part, feared they'd back out of the deal.

## *Laura's aura*

Two days later, after all the papers were signed, Julie returned to move into the house of her dreams. Her first act of ownership was to clear out the curtain rods — still lined with the decaying remnants of her last seafood dinner. Ten minutes of open windows and bleach later, the stench vanished, and just like that, the house regained its full market value of four million dollars.

Not that Julie had *any* intention of selling it.

But love, like the Alberta rosehip, bloomed  
quickly, and withered just as fast



-2-

**Virtual love**

Life would be insufferably drab without the flicker of an all-consuming passion to light our days. Is it not a most enviable fate to be swept up in such a conflagration of mind and body — an exultant blaze to elevate our otherwise flavorless, languishing existence ? Love, for better or worse, is the principal engine of life. One may scrape by without fortune, but never without this fever that ignites the heart. Even the thoughtful Teilhard de Chardin, with all his spiritual refinement, conceded that the human soul is not made to be alone. Though, in fairness, the solitary bachelor likely had a more abstract variety of love in mind than the one we invoke here.

The pursuit of happiness is strewn with snares. In our feverish quest for joy, we often trample the modest happiness already within our grasp, failing to recognize it until it's lost. This is nowhere more evident than in the precarious arenas of love and chance.

Even choosing a profession may prove treacherous. Aristide, a reticent dreamer, preferred to let his thoughts drift amid a thousand unattainable reveries. After watching a televised surgery, he briefly fancied himself a future plastic surgeon — a modern Prometheus sculpting harpies and shrews into paragons of elegance with a few practiced incisions. In his mind, he lifted sagging breasts, planning their enhancement like a renovator smoothing plaster — redistributing sordid, yellowish fat into graceful arcs and voluptuous contours. He worked the flesh like impasto on canvas, retaining only a pleasing plumpness. With greedy hands —like one stuffing trash into a bag— he imagined cramming deflated breasts with greasy fat until they swelled into enticing curves. He would then deftly drain the bags beneath their eyes, just as he would draw

coins from their purses in exchange for this alchemy. Best of all, he would bask in the unrestrained gratitude of his patients — his rewards as much emotional as they were financial.

On other occasions, Aristide envisioned himself as a Japanese or islamist suicide bomber for a cause yet to be invented — welcomed in Paradise by dozens of ethereal houris, adored by virgins who surrendered with ecstatic abandon to the sensuality he had so long suppressed.

He fancied himself, too, a valiant soldier, standing alone against a horde of fanatical foes, gunning them down one by one like a video game hero, unscathed and glorified.

At times he imagined a life in the priesthood, pardoning the Seven Deadly Sins with a debonair flick of the wrist, absolving the most heinous transgressions with the casual authority of a divine proxy. He would speak in the voice of a wrathful God to a congregation of trembling thurifers, bewitched by his proclamations, which thundered down like Sinai's law. Ah! To be idolized by these human ants!

On bolder evenings, he saw himself at the controls of a rescue helicopter, soaring over dizzying chasms, snatching a beautiful bather from the jaws of a raging shark — she would thank him with a necklace made of her graceful arms, pledged to him forever.

Sometimes he marched through the streets of Vancouver in a police uniform, arresting sadists and child-killers, his revolvers blazing in duels reminiscent of John Wayne or Gary Cooper — the indomitable cowboys of a vanished age.

Some more ambitious dreams ennobled him —as Prime Minister or better yet, President of a powerful nation— lavishly distributing millions siphoned from his country's taxpayers to foreign lands that exalted him with breathless adoration for his boundless beneficence.

Just as Scheherazade once distracted her impotent Sultan, Shahriar, night after night with her fantastical tales —warding off his carnal advances that could only end in failure and her inevitable death— so too did Aristide's fertile imagination strive to soothe his own ego. Each evening it offered up rewarding reveries to keep despair at bay, that persistent abyss of neurasthenia, prowling like a hungry she-wolf just beyond the light of his consciousness.

But Aristide's reality was far less glorious. He watched with envy the young men of his generation, all seemingly gorging themselves on life's confections, extracting every last drop of sweetness. He, by contrast, felt exiled from the well-worn paths of Love, unconvinced he possessed the constitution for the Art of Seduction — an esoteric craft he had once attempted to decipher in a book by Julien Green.

Some years earlier, he had wandered downtown, heartsick and hopeful, searching for his soul mate. His only victory was Jeannette, a kindly blonde, whom he escorted through the *Parc de la Serpentine* so she might admire the birds among the lilies. But after one such stroll, he noticed passersby casting furtive glances at his trousers, whispering cryptically behind cupped hands. Jeannette quietly pointed out the pale-yellow stains dotting the fabric— misleading, suspicious. In a panic, he scrubbed at them with all haste. It was only pollen, of course — from the lilies, whose stamens he had touched without thinking. But the damage, it seemed, was already done.

Despite his fertile imagination, Aristide wrestled daily with the oppressive weight of his chronic loneliness — made worse, perhaps, by the unsettling discovery that Socrates, the ugliest man in history, had managed to become the greatest philosopher of all time.



Aristide lived alone in a modest house nestled somewhere in the endless sprawl of Vancouver's suburbs — one of those relics from the fifties, painted in shades that suggested either madness or municipal neglect : methylene blue, taupe brown, blood red, or a defiant goose-poo green. These small, single-family dwellings — scarcely more generous than upgraded shacks— had once echoed with the wild joy of children, now replaced by the yapping of lap-dogs and the aloof meows of cats. Pets had filled the void left by offspring in this post-industrial society, which resembled a lullaby before disappearing into the mists of time.

In time, even the houses began to vanish. From the 1980s onward, they were razed to make room for bulky, multi-generational homes, a shift attributed —sometimes with whispered resentment— to the arrival of large Sikh and Punjabi families who, in the words of those who mourned the old ways, were replacing the dwindling Caucasian population.

Aristide's own little house had once flaunted a noble taupe, but now shimmered in a surreal gradient of turquoise bleeding into purple. This, due to his purchase —at a clearance sale— of three gallons of ghastly cyan-green paint, which he had thinned out with two gallons of sapphire blue. The result was questionable.

Despite a stable income as a nurse at Semiahmoo Hospital in White Rock, Aristide remained frugal. He had no wife, no children, but he did maintain a small menagerie: a dog, a cat, two goldfish, and a jerboa. And while he was spared the torments of adolescent vandals, he still lived in constant alertness — lest the cat swallow the jerboa, the fish vanish mysteriously, or the dog stage some cruel dominion over the cat. It was a delicate ecosystem.

He asked for little from the gods, but he often felt that one thing was missing: affection. Love. The tender chaos of human attachment.



## *Laura's aura*

—My dear friend, you should get yourself a computer and look for love online. It'll open your horizons!" someone had suggested to him one radiant spring evening, back when the computer—and more fantastically, the Internet—were still in their clunky infancy.

—*How could that be possible?* he asked, with the bewildered innocence of the Virgin Mary upon hearing from Gabriel that she would soon bear a son, having never "known" a man.

—*Simple !* his friend beamed. *Instead of searching for a soulmate among the hundred people you know, your hunt will span millions of women !*

—*Millions ?* he echoed, wide-eyed.

—*Yes, at least two or three million.*

That was roughly the number of computers buzzing on Earth back then<sup>1</sup>.

—*Thanks to the internet, you could now find—almost instantly—a loving, devoted partner, ready to shower you with twenty-four hours of tireless affection, every single day !*

It took less than a week before gentle Aristide was glued to his little screen with all the vigilance and fervor of a submarine commander peering through his periscope. From the start, however, surrounded by a dazzling array of women —voluptuous, uninhibited, and overflowing with charm— he felt as out of place as a eunuch at an orgy.

Still, within a few months, Aristide, who proved surprisingly adept at this strange new science called *computer technology*, managed to grasp the essentials: hard drives, blogs, webcams, mice, chips — he tackled them all.

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<sup>1</sup> This short story was written in 1990.



His first steps into the world of online matchmaking were anything but simple. The computer, it seemed, took a perverse delight in thwarting his most earnest romantic efforts. But through sheer stubbornness, Aristide eventually established himself online—like a spider poised in its web—ready to search, stalk, and catalog the digital wilderness of dating sites. His mouse-clicking finger hovered with relish over the most enticing profiles, his curious clicks fondling, probing, and scrutinizing every image, every face, every anatomical asset.

Paul, a teenage boy from the neighborhood, would sometimes lend a hand in navigating these virtual oceans. Weren't young people born fluent in the language of this rapidly transforming world? In exchange, Paul—who made his living as a pick-pocket—asked Aristide to play the part of a tourist so he could practice his peculiar craft. With a wink, Paul dubbed him his "theft simulator".

Thanks to the nimble-fingered thief, Aristide soon had accounts on multiple dating sites, where he embellished his profile with virtues he didn't entirely possess, and made lavish promises designed to beguile even the most discerning of suitors.

One day, a young Senegalese girl sent him a warm, favorable message—and so began an utterly unforgettable adventure. Marie-Philomène possessed an engaging and generous beauty. It was with a steadily mounting thrill—tinged with something like ecstasy—that Aristide, with a single click of the mouse, explored the grace and majesty of this exotic young creature. His once dreamless nights became crowded with intoxicating mirages, so vivid they sometimes perfumed his sheets with mimosa.

Clearly, this girl pleased him immensely, and—being, at heart, a decent man—he quickly began to envision a life with her,

even marriage. He lavished her with gifts, international money transfers, and plans for a shared future. As the days passed, she appeared to him in the proud lineage of the women of N'der — those fearless Senegalese heroines who, rather than fall into the hands of Arab-Muslim slave traders, chose death over the shame of bondage.

Then, one day, she sent him a desperate email. Her mother, she wrote, had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer. A devoted daughter, Marie-Philomène was desperate to find the funds to seek the best doctors in Dakar — true professionals, not the swarm of local charlatans. Aristide urged her to come to Canada. He would sponsor her for a visa, since Canadian Immigration would never approve entry for someone sick enough to burden the generous social system.

But Marie-Philomène declined, gently but firmly. Her mother, she said, wished to die in Senegal, in the land of her ancestors. Aristide sent money —copious amounts— to summon the finest expertise the country could offer. Yet despite their efforts, her beloved mother succumbed, for Madam Death, once invited, cannot be dismissed. Aristide, still moved, paid for a First-Class funeral and soon after proposed that Marie-Philomène join him in Canada. Now she was free, he said, to live wherever she pleased.

*—No, she replied. No, I can't. My father is still alive. I can't abandon him — not like that. Even if he hasn't always been perfect... he needs care. Care that is both diligent and watchful.*

A good philosopher, Aristide decided to wait. He waited — not without a twinge of guilt— for a final change that could only be tragic for her beloved father. He contented himself with words of love and the occasionally moving images that Marie-Philomène sent to rekindle the flame whenever she sensed it flickering in Aris-

tide's heart. Alongside these heady images, she shared tender confessions that unsettled the young Canadian, plunging him into a heightened state of sensitivity and empathy.

She had known little luck in life. Her father had vanished during her fifth spring, and her mother, left to fend for them both, had resorted to morally questionable expedients to raise them and secure a private education. Just as a prosperous —perhaps even opulent— future seemed within reach, political upheaval dashed her hopes of climbing the social ladder. She had been unjustly expelled from her school to make room for the daughter of a politician from the party that had illegally seized power.

What could she do now? Aristide seethed with indignation as he read these accounts of malice and injustice. He also knew that money, though no panacea, could repair many wrongs and ease the way forward. He asked Marie-Philomène whether she saw any means of extricating herself from the burdens that blocked her path. He begged her to let him assume the role of Providence — a force that sometimes condescends to correct the world's injustices.

Marie-Philomène replied curtly that she did not want his money. Aristide pressed her, determined to overcome not only her resistance but also her own excessive pride. He reminded her that the blood of the *Women of N'der* ran through her veins — a noble pride, yes, but one that might hinder the smoother course of her life. At last, and with clear reluctance, she agreed to accept some material support.

After five years of waiting —years marked by discreet and modest requests— she finally agreed to spend Christmas in White Rock. Deep down, Aristide suspected that her persistent hesitations masked a deeper resignation : she had likely abandoned the idea of ever becoming his wife. Still, he sent her a generous sum to purchase a plane ticket from Dakar to Vancouver, with enough to cover hotel stays in Paris and Montreal along the way.

## *Laura's aura*

Then, he set about bringing order to his home, lest she feel overwhelmed while navigating the teetering piles of odds and ends that cluttered every room. For in ordinary households, each object has two places : one intended (a drawer, a cupboard), and one real (a pile, a chair, the floor). But in Aristide's home, objects had only one place—the permanent chaos of a syllogomaniac's hoard.



When good order was finally restored, Aristide felt the strange sensation of inhabiting someone else's home. He arranged Marie-Philomène's room with great care: a bouquet of red roses on the bedside table, petals scattered across the bedspread—both to be renewed on the day of her arrival. In the living room, he strung up four garlands adorned with Senegalese flags. The nest was finally ready to welcome the bird.

His Western arrogance convinced him that once Marie-Philomène had tasted the Canadian paradise he offered, she would never return to Senegal. The young woman would likely stop over in Paris and arrive exhausted by the punishing length of the journey and the effects of jet lag.

Now, Aristide had only to wait until December 20th at 11:59 p.m., when the plane from Dakar—via Paris and Montreal—was due to land.



That late evening, Aristide parked in the sprawling airport lot and began his long vigil. A red rose adorned his buttonhole, a symbol meant to identify him at once to his beloved Marie-Philomène. His heart pounded.

She had promised to wear a red rose on her chest and a small Senegalese flag as a scarf around her neck. Red and black go

very well together, don't they? It was Aristide's idea, and it delighted him. When we are in love, we invent small rituals — gestures that may seem trivial or extravagant to anyone untouched by that inexplicable intoxication, that bubbling of the heart, that frenzy of the mind for which one would not hesitate to die.

Even thirty years later, the memory of all that careful planning still brought tears of tenderness to Aristide's eyes.

Impatient to finally see *his Light in the Night*, Aristide stood amid a vibrant throng of people — faces of every shade and hue — gathered to welcome the passengers of Air France flight AF8378. His body trembled with emotion at the thought of embracing his beautiful Senegalese woman, with her deep onyx eyes and luscious lips.

Every ten minutes, he lifted each arm in turn, furtively checking his armpits, anxious that the scent of his anticipation-soaked body might betray him. His mind was a battlefield of doubt. *What if she didn't like him? What if she changed her mind? What if life together in Canada no longer appealed to her?* Anxiety devoured his thoughts and melted his composure. Sweat broke through his pores, releasing pungent fumes that exposed the storm raging within him.

He was seized by that familiar nightmare—the one that haunted his fevered sleep: walking down the street only to realize he'd forgotten to get dressed. That same vulnerable unease now clung to him like a second skin. When he glanced over his shoulder, he realized his armpit-sniffing hadn't gone unnoticed. A few amused bystanders stifled their smirks and turned away with feigned indifference.

A handful of African travelers made his heart leap with hope — but none wore the identifying signs : a red rose and a scarf in the green, white, and red of Senegal.

## *Laura's aura*

Beside him, a child slept in his mother's embrace. At a traveler's feet, a dog lay curled and content. No one else seemed to feel the hurricane of panic that had hollowed him out, made him a ghost among the living. *How could they be so calm?*

All eyes were trained on the glowing screens above the Canada Customs exit, scanning the tide of passengers for a familiar face. The crowd swelled, then thinned. In twenty minutes, the multitude dissolved into a herd, then a gathering, then a cluster... and finally, a scattering of individuals.

At one in the morning, as the last of the travelers emerged, Aristide ran up to a pair of customs officers hurrying toward the exit.

*—Are there any passengers left inside? Anyone detained by Immigration or Customs?*

*—No, sir! Everyone's out. It's over.*

*—But... that's not possible !*

*—Yes. I assure you.*

He turned, distraught, to the only three people still waiting nearby. And what he saw froze the blood in his veins: all three wore a red rose in their lapel and a Senegalese tricolor scarf — just like him.



-3-

**Never give up hope.**

Daniel had always been —and always would be— a lazy slacker. He harbored a profound contempt for himself, which occasionally surfaced in pitiful little phrases meant to defuse the irritation of those around him :

—*Yes, I know! I'm a loser! No need to rub it in...*

He began cheating in school at an early age. Not because good grades meant anything to him —they didn't— but they did matter to his parents, especially his father, who dissected every report card with forensic precision. So, Daniel found an elegant solution to the problem of his own indolence : he simply stole the knowledge of others. He plagiarized every test, every exam, and outsourced his homework to a loyal, affection-starved classmate named Josiane.

Daniel was also afflicted —no, *possessed*— by a more curious flaw : like many of his generation, he adored fear. Craved it. Every week, he sought it out, feeding on it like a junkie. Whether through horror films or reckless stunts, he yearned for the spike of terror: the racing heart, the feverish breath, the damp palms, the surge of adrenaline galloping through his veins like an *appaloosa* across *Nez Percé* country.

Ah ! What sovereign pleasure to feel such exquisite turmoil, in those bygone days, when narcotics were confined to genteel bottles of laudanum — an opioid elixir, brewed by the British in colonial Bengal and unleashed upon the world, not unlike the substances peddled today by the Medellín Cartel.

Daniel spent obscene amounts of money feeding his addiction to fear. He never missed a horror film, devoured grim reading



material, and immersed himself in the goriest recesses of human history. He knew by heart the massacres that marred the twentieth century : Armenians, Bohemians, Ibos, Rwandans, Jews... He had pored over blood-soaked accounts of the transatlantic slave trade and listened wide-eyed to tales of the even older, even crueler Arab-Muslim slave trade through Zanzibar and the Sahara — an inferno of human suffering so vast and vile it seemed to defy imagination. An infamy, he liked to believe, that only colonialism could bring to heel.

But through a kind of habituation —or perhaps an inflation of sensitivity— even the sharpest jolts of fear and horror no longer sufficed. One year, he embarked on a pilgrimage across the United States in search of the most terrifying roller coaster. And God knows the effort this country invests in scaring itself, if only to demonstrate its own courage — for what is courage, after all, if not the conquest of fear?

As for plagiarism, Daniel had spent years twisting his mind into knots, not to avoid effort, but to perfect the art of intellectual theft. Paradoxically, he often devoted more energy to crafting ingenious schemes than it would have taken to simply study. He would agonize over the creation of his MCS —minuscule cheat-sheets— until, through sheer repetition and refinement, he had unknowingly absorbed the very knowledge he intended to fake.

Yet again, the thrill was not in the outcome but in the act itself. What truly intoxicated him was the rush — the adrenaline surge that consumed his mind and body as he eluded the scrutiny of proctors. He risked public disgrace, academic expulsion, legal penalties, even prison. It was a game, yes — but also a sensual pleasure, not unlike that of the wealthy kleptomaniac who steals not out of need, but for the delicious tingle of danger. Perhaps Daniel's prefrontal cortex — the supposed seat of moral reasoning —

had been quietly dismantled by some minor, long-forgotten accident, now tucked away in a dusty recess of his memory. Most people feel the aftershocks of life's small traumas only in old age. For our hero, they arrived much earlier.

Usually, when Daniel didn't have the luxury of sitting near a promising student, he resorted to his MCS system, carefully distributed throughout the layers of his clothing. The left inner jacket pocket held notes on Chapter Six; the right, on Chapter Three; and in the right pocket of his trousers...



Toward the end of high school, his girlfriend —eager to join in his dangerous little game, purely for the pleasure of the gesture— began writing formulas of all kinds across her nubile thighs. During exams, she would raise her skirts and petticoats with practiced innocence, letting him decipher the answers scrawled on her skin. Of course, this sort of behavior solved fewer problems than it caused, but that only made the game more hilarious. And besides, some classmates managed to benefit from the tableau, gleaning a bit of healthy, if illicit, assistance.

Now old and quadriplegic, Daniel recalled the episode with a fond smile. The girl had taken her own quiet delight in the farce. On exam days, she wore a short pink petticoat trimmed with delicate Breton lace, which she hoisted with small, endearing gestures — just enough to stir not only curiosity but the activity of certain hormonal vectors, such as the luteinizing hormone so admired by... the Elves.

She did it for him, for the other boys, and above all, for the sheer aesthetic pleasure of the act — for the beauty of the gesture. She didn't need the help ; she studied well, and with energy, both necessary and sufficient, she earned excellent results through honest work. But love, in her case, demanded a little theater.

She loved Daniel dearly, despite his indifference, and hoped her devotion might draw him back to the path of discipline and resolve — just as the Greek poet Ovid once wrote :

*“I was born to lead an indolent life. I languished in shadow and inaction; Venus deceived my expectation. A beautiful girl appeared; I followed her rags. My life has been active and vigilant ever since. Believe my advice, cold, inanimate hearts ! Do you fear laziness ? Love !”*

But for Daniel, it was no use. The tireless efforts of his magnificent young lover failed to rouse him from the torpor of apathy, the slumber of resignation that dulled his mind — and, increasingly, his limbs.

At university, Daniel behaved much the same. Cheating had become second nature — no longer a tactic, but a way of being. The ability to surrender his mind to sustained, honest labor had long since withered. He earned a BA in Science, followed by a Master's degree, and finally topped it all off with a PhD thesis that was, in truth, a Finnish research paper on “*the strength, reliability, and longevity of plastics and anisotropic materials in nature*”—translated, not authored. His thesis defense was a grueling affair, yet he was waved through in the end, likely as a reward for his genial chatter and unfailing bonhomie.



Armed with his credentials, Daniel quickly secured a lucrative position with an oil-chemical conglomerate. The company, desperate for willing Westerners to venture into lands ravaged by war and corrupted by swarms of *ashashins*<sup>1</sup>, had few other takers. These were regions where bands of fanatics —each clinging to

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<sup>1</sup> *Ashashins*—a medieval sect whose members famously drugged themselves with *hashish* (hence the name) to muster the courage to commit murder. Today's Islamist terrorists rely on substances like captagon—aptly nicknamed *the drug of courage*—to achieve the same.

their own baroque, pseudo-religious rationale— unleashed grotesque violence on impoverished Muslim communities. It gave them, these failures in search of meaning, the delusion that they were not entirely insignificant. In truth, they had merely demoted themselves to the level of viruses — pathogens infecting the planet with fear.

Daniel took the job in a Middle Eastern desert. Despite the ever-present risk of being kidnapped, tortured, or incinerated in the name of some delirious ideal, he felt a rare sense of validation. In these vast semi-desert lands, wrapped in exotic culture and distance, the chances of exposing his scientific hollowness were blissfully slim.

He relished his new rousing title : *General Supervisor of Petrochemical Testing*. Above him stood only a Saudi — undoubtedly less competent, but steadfast in his mission to uphold national pride by pretending that foreigners weren't necessarily superior.

Lacking any real knowledge of organic chemistry —his degrees having been acquired through unspeakable means— Daniel resorted, as always, to cunning. He made a show of placing his "*complete trust*" in his subordinates, nodding pensively whenever presented with a technical problem. Then, he would promptly call a meeting to "*resolve*" it — thereby avoiding any exposure of his ignorance.

In truth, he was spectacularly unfit for the job. The scraps of knowledge he had once mustered to forge his academic credentials had long since dissolved in the stagnant waters of his mental inactivity. He had no desire to remedy his deficiencies ; not once did he open a scientific journal that might have acquainted him with recent discoveries or emerging research.

But then — how could he find the time? Most of his work-days were spent nurturing friendships on tennis courts, not in the lab. Still, he remained cautious. The fall of Baron Karl-Theodor zu

Guttenberg, Germany's Defense Minister, lingered in his mind — a man who, despite his illustrious lineage, was forced to resign in 2011 when it came to light that his degrees had been purchased from a sham British university for a mere \$120,000.

The scandal had been all over the news. Daniel had watched it unfold with a creeping sense of dread. He recoiled at the thought of being torn apart by the same ravenous journalists — vultures who, in their lust for profit, would gladly raze entire forests to print their righteous outrage.



Time passed with quiet indifference. Daniel —no fool, far from it— was keenly aware of the paradox he embodied. *"The world is unfair,"* he often mused with a cynical smile. *"The only excuse is that I happen to be the one profiting from the absurdity."*

His oil company paid him a lavish salary, all thanks to degrees he had never truly earned. Meanwhile, the real minds behind the operation —the laboratory researchers— earned laughably modest wages, despite being the true engine of industrial progress. Daniel sometimes wondered how many wheels in the great machinery of society were merely parasitic. And how long he could remain one of them. Superstitious by nature, he would tap on wood and cross his fingers as if to charm fate. *"What's taken is taken,"* he liked to say, or *"Let's hope it lasts,"* echoing Madame Bonaparte, mother of the Great Emperor.

But one day, scandal crept in from the neighboring town.

It began quietly. A woman filed a complaint : the polyvinyl chloride piping installed around her house just five years earlier was falling apart. How could PVC —a plastic meant to endure four centuries— decompose in a handful of years?

Then came another complaint, from a different neighborhood. And soon, entire subdivisions were in uproar. Underground networks —drains, sewers, water lines, ducts— were crumbling. Streets were barricaded, neighborhoods frozen in chaos, their infrastructure vanishing before their eyes.

The blame descended like a storm. Lawsuits struck the petrochemical company like a barrage of missiles. And all eyes turned to the *General Supervisor of Laboratory Research* — the man who should have caught the error.

A *Commission of Inquiry* later confirmed what many had suspected : though his degrees were real on paper, Daniel knew scarcely more chemistry than the illiterate guards patrolling the factory grounds — men who earned a minuscule fraction of his salary.

The company collapsed. Doors shut. Eight hundred workers were cast out, their families plunged into economic ruin and the cold grip of poverty.

Desperate, Daniel was fired. His wife left him, taking the children with her. Heartbroken, he began to drink. He drifted into a life of vagrancy, a ragged ghost of the man he once hoped to become. He bitterly reproached himself for never having studied in earnest, relying instead on shortcuts to scrape through his degrees. The deep contempt he had once felt in childhood —directed inward, unspoken— returned to settle in him like a parasite.

Each morning, he would pinch his arm in disgust and whisper to himself : “*You will always be useless. A parasite.*”

But one day, Destiny —moved, perhaps, by pity— decided to end his torment. An automobile struck him down in front of the hospital. Death was instantaneous.

He was wheeled, anonymous and broken, into the hospital morgue.

## *Laura's aura*

But the story did not end there. Doctors soon discovered that, despite his recent alcoholism, Daniel's organs were in remarkable condition.

They harvested them.

His heart took up its beat again in the chest of a dying man. His liver filtered the blood of a terminal hemophiliac. His kidneys brought relief to two patients with Bellini duct cancer. His eyes restored sight to two men blinded by glaucoma. His legs gave a once-legless man the power to walk again, to outrun the dust. His bone marrow rekindled life in a leukemia patient. His hands, surgically grafted, returned touch and function to two amputees. And—last but not least—his gut microbiota, teeming with ten trillion reeking organisms, was generously transferred into twelve ailing bodies, reviving their immune systems and restoring their health.

If, in the pit of his despair of being worthless, Daniel had known that he would one day be beneficial to so many fellow human beings, perhaps he would have felt a measure of pride.

*We must never give up hope !*



**Laura's aura**

Here I am, entombed in the lair of old age — the final antechamber to the Beyond. I, too, am one of those "unfortunates of the earth who began to die twenty years before their last day." I now inhabit this second life, the strange half-life that begins when one finally grasps that death is no longer a vague idea but a visible point on the horizon.

In this borrowed time, we cling feverishly to every crumb of passing hours. Growing old is a nuisance, yes — but it's the only route to a long life.

That first life ? Mostly squandered in the careless frivolity of forgetting we have a Destiny at all.

Slumped in my wheelchair, adrift in the middle of the great hall of this old folks' hospice, I stare into a past as tangled and stringy as the guts of an autopsied corpse. My body, inert, already half-claimed by *rigor mortis*, sits like a husk while my mind slices through the film reel of my life — dissecting, scrutinizing, re-editing.

Like a weary scriptwriter, I replay each scene, rewriting my role as I should have once performed it.

Memories come like dead leaves — yes, as the song says, "*they fall by the shovelful*." And I rake through them, brittle and brown, haunted by what still gnaws like hungry hyenas circling a fading fire.

To visitors, and even to fellow inmates who still shuffle about, I am the living allegory of death. My face, locked in a gro-



tesque neutrality by Bell's palsy, offers no comfort. Fate, in its peculiar sense of humor, struck me doubly — both sides frozen, when usually only one would suffice. I am a dead man on probation, awaiting the final plunge into the *Great Nothing*.

I interrogate my past as it slides away like a dry leaf caught in the wrathful breath of an *Arctic squamish*.<sup>1</sup> I eye the future with suspicion, wary of the wind that might come too soon — that same wind surfers and other sky-bound daredevils worship.

I watch, spider-like, from the center of my web, not for flies — though some do annoy me enough to force my eyelids closed, shutting out sight and sound — but for the errant word, the stray look, the dropped mask. I listen hungrily to everything said around me, my immobility sharpening my awareness like a blade.

Some Sunday visitors glance at me with a thin film of disgust, and I understand. Whether we are beautiful or grotesque, nimble or dulled, the gaze of others tells us plainly what we are. One winter Sunday — when the sun creeps up late and slinks away early, like a sloth dodging the cold — a curious child crept closer to peer into my barely parted eyes. His face, young and handsome, wrinkled into a fearful grimace. The faded blue of my irises, peeking out between slitted lids, surrounded pupils that must have seemed like the eyes of a cornered animal — dark, hollow, hunted.

So here I am, paralyzed by a stroke layered atop Bell's cruel gift. As the old saying goes, "*only the rich get credit*" — and indeed, fate has lavishly credited me with its worst. I am condemned to follow, helpless and obedient, the slow procession into the mirror of the Underworld.

In this state of subjugation and abandonment, I cannot help but think of the Alsatian "*malgré-nous*" — those "despite-themselves" men, conscripted to march in tight ranks toward the Eastern

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<sup>1</sup> A Western Canada wind.

Front to defend a satanic cause that was never theirs. I think of the Scottish Highlanders who, over centuries, bled and died on distant battlefields to enrich their oppressors; of the Jews of Auschwitz, herded toward *Das Dusche*; of the millions of castrated slaves, chained in endless columns beneath the indifferent eyes of Arab camel drivers — dropping from exhaustion among the Sahara dunes or rotting in the prison-pits of Zanzibar. The survivors were exiled to the lands of the Arabian Nights, not as people, but as scenery.

“Old Justin breathed his last while his wife went to rest at the cafeteria,” a caregiver murmured behind my back. He too, like so many others ! He slipped away —perhaps deliberately— to spare his overly devoted wife. She had held his hand day and night, fed him by spoon, gently parted his lips for mashed potatoes. She had worked herself to death with her care, terrified of being blamed for letting him go without a fight.

Her self-sacrifice was praised, which only drove her to further sacrifice. But old Justin, proud to the end, chose not to die in her scrupulous hands. Ah, hell ! Now she'll suffer all the more, because she stepped away for just one moment !

Yes. The glances of the Sunday visitors confirm it : it is always in the eyes of others that we truly see ourselves — as if in a mirror. I know my cadaveric stillness frightens them.

My mother once saw me as a child prodigy. I believed in myself. Throughout my life, I've thought of myself as kind and compassionate — just misunderstood. Those who didn't love me ? *Simply envious*, I told myself, maliciously so. But now, when I look back with unflinching clarity, the balance sheet of my life is brutal. Nearly everyone who has known me has met me with animosity. So perhaps the truth is this: *I am the poisonous one*.

Life —this brief voyage across the surface of the earth— is still a marvel. We are never prepared for what it throws at us. At

birth, it feels like we're boarding a high-speed train, clinging instinctively to our parents, as if they'll ride with us to the end of the line. But of course, they won't. Sooner or later, they disembark at some shadowy station, leaving us behind to hurtle forward alone. *Ah !* The ache of that loneliness. The sudden, tender fragility of it all.

Thankfully, other passengers board : lovers, friends, children. Our children — they bring joy, love, chaos, sorrow. It's a bittersweet cocktail of affection and heartache. And all the while, the days rush past like storm winds.

Eventually, we, too, must leave the little train of life. Sometimes it's a sorrowful departure. Sometimes, a quiet relief — especially when the world begins to feel foreign, as if we no longer belong. And here I am now, watching my train barrel toward a wall: the looming wall of overpopulation, of climate collapse.



At night, in the blind blackness, I chew over every crumb of my distant past. It's in the velvet silence of night that old voices and faces emerge most vividly. But we must be wary of such indulgence. The past is a scorpion. If we press our hearts too closely to it in the secrecy of darkness, it will sting — bleed us dry, poison us, break us. For the heart of an old man is as delicate as a rainbow on a soap bubble.

And by day, I sit slouched in my wheelchair, my eyes stuck to the bay window like a fly on the glass, sifting through memories, regrets, thoughts. What else is there to do in a wheelchair, after all, but think ?

I dissect. I ruminate. I unravel the events that have marked my long existence, like a path walked backward with deliberate, reluctant steps. In some way, I am the onlooker of myself — a witness to the autopsy of my own life. I, who so often feared the grip

of old age while secretly hoping to live as long as possible, once strolled through the very same cavernous halls of retirement homes where the elderly sit in quiet expectation, patiently awaiting the next visit. Their hope is slowly gnawed by the relentless ticking of the great clock, each indifferent hour passing like a wave eroding a brittle shore—until, at last, the final one washes everything away.

Back then, I had no inkling that old age is not merely a withering of the body, but a feeding frenzy — a tank teeming with piranhas, where the elderly are prey to the most pitiless of predators. And parents, I've learned, are not the least dangerous.

I should have known that returning to the often-painful past would exact a price. Like a pelican struggling to regurgitate its hard-won catch for its young, I feel as though I'm retching up a lifetime of memories — a sour mass of grief and gall, with bones still caught in my throat. Yes, the past still stings.

If the body is 85% water, then life is 90% wasted — spent waiting. Waiting for the game, the sleep, the bus, the enemy, the ones we love, the ones we hate. Only a mere tenth is action. Ah, if only we could retrieve that squandered time. But we have only one pass through this life — no rehearsals, no repeats.

I once walked through these waiting rooms like a carefree tourist, drifting among earthy faces and bodies crumpled with wrinkles — each line etched by sorrow or vice. I used to imagine the thousands of years those lives added up to — centuries and millennia layered end to end, packed into a single corridor.

I remember it clearly: how I skirted around the rows of wheelchairs, trying to convince myself I didn't belong in that decaying world, that I was merely passing through this field of despair and would soon reach dry land — the doorway back to the living.

But as I looked upon that gallery of flesh worn down by time — bodies twisted by scoliosis, bloated with bags of incontinence, curled in on themselves with pain, some deformed by arthritis like Van Gogh's tormented olive trees, others lost in dementia — I couldn't help but wonder: how many of them, just fifteen or twenty years prior, had stood tall in prestigious lives? Respected surgeons, elite athletes, skilled craftsmen, devoted nurses, revered priests, fearless soldiers — thousand professions that once lit their names in gold. They had all climbed so high. And the higher the climb, the harder the fall.

Senility, with its slow procession of humiliations, dances in step with the pineal gland's quiet programming. Together, they conspire to turn us into shadows of what we were.

Berthe, my neighbor today — I like to look at her, not as she is, but as she once was. I see her through the photograph of her youth, which I had the chance to admire before she became this withered, inert plant. She was beautiful — so beautiful it bordered on indecency. How could one not become obsessed with love and lust like a bonobo monkey in the face of such overwhelming allure? She herself had seen that ravishing reflection in every mirror, in every shop window downtown, in the eyes of every passing Vancouverite.

She had been sought after, besieged by the love-obsessed—two of whom, she boasted proudly, had died mid-climax. She had lost all sense of sexual satiety, so accustomed was she to seeing men respond to her as poodles to a trainer: the slightest blink, the faintest gesture, and the beast obeyed in hopes of its reward. Today, she must have only the vaguest memory of those hordes of ardent lovers who once jostled to touch her G-spot. Her life had been a frenzied cavalcade of romantic disasters and spectacular failures. Her drunken ship finally ran aground — not on a sandy beach, but

on a wooden bench, among a huddle of shaggy, unwashed homeless men. She now sleeps in her car beneath empty boxes stamped *Chiquita Bananas*, shielding herself from the pitying stares of passers-by — for contrary to what people say, poverty is seen as failure, a shameful disease.

In these refuges of the forgotten, only the least fortunate seem to fare slightly better : the biological permutations of aging sometimes grant the formerly unattractive a strange grace, while the once-gorgeous decay into grotesque caricatures. Old age, in its cruel democracy, erases differences and unites all survivors in the same washed-out disgrace. Nature itself stirs discord between the sexes — once-dominant males soften under a flood of late-life estrogen, while the testosterone dwindles in women, shriveling their essence. Here, the once-violent no longer muster energy, and the perpetually grumpy stay silent for fear of exhausting their anemic hearts. The charming madmen of youth no longer scatter their frivolous genes. They merely soak their diapers or shuffle around with bags of incontinence.

The old battlegrounds of love and hate, pleasure and frustration, now rage silently in the mind and soul. Age wrinkles the spirit as deeply as the skin. The addicts, the alcoholics, the gluttons — they've long since vanished into their synthetic heavens. The ailments of old age are the cruel sentence reserved for those who, like me, lived in moderation. A few men remain, luckier than the others who forgot that life is meant to be lived as we please — but lived only once. There are no rehearsals. And yet, sometimes I regret having been so prudish in that distant youth, for the madness of the past becomes the sweetest daydreams of us paralytics. It's easier to relinquish what you've experienced than what you can only imagine.

## *Laura's aura*

André Gide once said that a youth too pure makes for a more vicious old age. How were we to know that most pleasures carry pain in their wake ?

Here and there in the common room, a few old women — half-swallowed by death like rats in the jaws of monstrous snakes — try to savor a foretaste of the heavenly bliss they believe awaits them in Paradise. On earth, they denied themselves even the faintest indulgence in the pleasures of the Goddess Voluptuousness, terrified of eternal damnation. Now, they beg God and all His saints for mercy, but their half-forgotten prayers only deepen their agony. They fear that to pray absent-mindedly, without embodying the words, is to risk having the prayers recoil and bite like treacherous serpents. The *Grim Reaper*, delighted to watch them self-mutilate in hopes of appeasing their unforgiving God, grins with glee. She knows the gods are so jealous of one another that men ought to be less tolerant of their divine despotism.



Every morning, an orderly wheels me into the midst of these half-decayed specters who rise from their rooms like corpses from their graves. Their eyes, gleaming deep in their sockets like water glinting at the bottom of old wells, seem to look at everything and see nothing. With my left index finger — the only part of me I can still command — I signal for the orderly to adjust my chair, to better align it with the others. If it's not just so, I fume in silence. It's my one obsession.

Then I return to ruminating on the past — sometimes with pleasure, more often with revulsion.

Now and then, a breeze brings me scraps of conversation from Laura, my assigned caregiver :

—*This old 'tabarnak' is as disgusting as a dead rat ! He's never happy !*

## *Laura's aura*

—*How do you even know he's unhappy?... He's mute. I'm not even sure he's all there,* says another.

And another chimes in :

—*I get the feeling he's a little perverse.*

—*Oh yeah? Why do you say that ?*

—*I've seen the way he looks at me, with those sly, hypocritical eyes.*

—*Ha! As if you're the only beauty around here !*

Sometimes, Laura casts such fiercely biased glances at me that I'm forced to lower my gaze. Like a beaten dog rolling onto its back in total submission, I always end up averting my eyes — an instinctive gesture, not to protect myself, but to preserve her fragile *equilibrium*. We are like two wretched galley slaves, bound by an invisible chain of mutual aversion. She can wound me, yes — but I, too, could destroy her... simply by dying under her watch.

More and more, day and night, the past haunts me. It clings to my soul like soot, never letting it rest. These obsessive black reminiscences — those tyrannical mosquitoes of memory — swarm back the moment I let down my guard. I chase them off until exhaustion, only for them to return, undeterred. At times, I feel my brain capsize, growing numb to everything. A kind of sweet, drifting euphoria overtakes me — reminiscent of those blessed days when a glass of cognac or a double bourbon could momentarily dissolve all my worries and grant me brief sanctuary. But now, it is senile dementia that soothes my soul's wounds — while at the same time gnawing through my past like a rat with insatiable incisors.

Trying to describe old age to the young is like explaining snow to a Senegalese man who has never left his sunlit country or the golden sands of its endless beaches. Old age struck my face one



cruel morning without warning. It was the mirror — a damned traitor — that gave me away. I'd never been one to examine myself closely, except when shaving my foam-covered, grimacing face. As long as you avoid your reflection, you can pretend time hasn't touched you. Youth is sold the lie that age brings wisdom and serenity. What rubbish. The years bring sadness, bitterness, and a persistent melancholy. In old age, we're so consumed by the misfortunes of the past, we forget we ever had moments of joy.

And what could be more heart-wrenching than, as the years pile on, striking out names in your address book, visiting former lovers in cemeteries? The settings and people of our youth have vanished, and the world that's emerged feels alien, disturbing. Better to ruminate on a mediocre past than stare down a dismal future. Obsessions and regrets are like rocking chairs — keeping your mind occupied while going absolutely nowhere. And woe to those who are awarded physical suffering as an added bonus.

The last of my nerve cells are busy trying to untangle old knots life never gave me the time or courage to unravel. That stepfather, who strained me so — why didn't I send him to hell and leave? And that boss, cruel and petit — how did I ever let him walk all over me? And love... Ah, love! What a bittersweet residue it leaves behind — part honey, part gall. Where is she now, the one who shared with me both bliss and frustration, tenderness and prolonged sulking? Age has made me curious to see what became of my former loves. One has descended into senile fog; the other rests eternally in a charming, peaceful cemetery in Kamloops, with a breathtaking view of Lake Tranquille.

Now, the stiffness of my face and the stillness of my body permit me, at last, to observe women without shame, without stealth. This, perhaps, is the only benefit of facial paralysis. What is permitted to the young becomes taboo for the old, in whom even

the smallest flicker of desire is deemed disgraceful, a shameful depravity.

Like the ancient Egyptians, I sail in my solar barque, adrift through the twilight decade of my life — the one where the *Grim Reaper*, scythe gleaming with mischief, cuts down my traveling companions in swift, merciless succession. I think of my children — my daughters. We don't choose our parents; we endure them... just as we endure some of our more difficult offspring.

My life replays endlessly in my weary head, a never-ending soap opera rerun.



Our afternoons in the grand lobby are our chief diversion, one we wouldn't miss for the world. We form great arcs with our wheelchairs and walkers, watching one another with tireless fascination. Rearranging ourselves within the circle offers the illusion of novelty, a subtle way to inspect our fellow inmates, or to observe the occasional visitor who breezes in with the scent of the living world still clinging to their coat. Sometimes we even manage to speak to them — those of us who still can. Sadly, I no longer count myself among that number.

Last Wednesday, I was seated across from Ms. Latendresse. Despite her name, this Albertan from Lake Athabasca has never married, nor entertained any common-law entanglements. Yet I know her work greatly advanced the medical science of abortion — a field of some personal relevance to me, as I made a decent living off its legal intricacies.

By Friday morning, I found myself opposite one of the few men left in the retirement home. We are a vanishing breed in such places. Fate, petty and cruel, grants women the gift of longevity—denying it to us with gleeful injustice. Women, it seems, collaborate more willingly with Dame Death. They still apply makeup to

seduce her. The Grim Reaper repays them with added years... and dispatches us, the men, without mercy.

Still, our rarity has its consolations. Some men, despite unfortunate features, discover in old age a flock of faded yet eager women vying for their attention. I, too, once basked in such flattery — until word spread that my children now guarded my estate like vigilant Cerberuses. Not long after, a stroke completed my downfall, reducing me to a silent, vegetative ghost of myself.

One of my occasional neighbors —when chance wheels him into my field of vision— is named Pierre Trudeau. Yes, like *that* Pierre Trudeau : the great Canadian statesman who secured his legacy in English Canada by humiliating Quebecers with inflammatory rhetoric and imposing martial law upon them. He crushed us in peacetime, stripping away our civil liberties. English Canada, ever grateful, re-elected him — again and again.

Our Trudeau —in this peculiar hospice— had once been a celebrated authority among professional gamblers. Eager to distinguish himself from the realm of ordinary mortals, he famously proclaimed that he had given his heart and soul to an obscure Eastern faith : the worship of *Ganesh*, the elephant-headed deity of distant India. Each morning without fails, Pierre offered his praise and prayers to his beloved proboscidean patron before embarking on the day's schemes.

Under Ganesh's presumed auspices, he amassed a small fortune by cruising luxuriously between Vancouver and Alaska— gambling, of course, with other people's money. Though the Mounted Police tried repeatedly, they never managed to put him behind bars. Trudeau had a disarming habit of warning curious would-be partners with the utmost clarity: "My profession is gambler, to cheat at cards in order to relieve my competitors of their money." It was clear, concise, unassailable. And still, the wealthy

## *Laura's aura*

fools gambled —driven by curiosity or ego— and, inevitably, they lost handsomely.

But time, the great cheat, caught up with him. In his twilight years, the master swindler was himself outfoxed — stripped of his ill-gotten gains by a platinum-blond enchantress he adored with fatal naïveté.



In the village nestled among the Rocky Mountains where I was born, I entered this world —as I now prepare to leave it— with the same companion : a deep, aching dread of the unknown. From early on, I sensed that I was not like other children. Whether by divine design, fate, or perhaps the mischief of the Devil himself — who could say?— I had been set apart.

And yet, I understood instinctively that this secret must be guarded. To reveal it would invite ridicule from the incredulous or the envy of those less fortunate. For what *Mother Nature* had given me —eccentric in its generosity— was the peculiar gift of perceiving the *aura* of my fellow beings. A fanciful claim, perhaps, even absurd, until one pauses to consider the strange clarity and insight it offered me.

The miracle first manifested after an accident of the body. Like *Hop-o'-My-Thumb*, lost in the night with his siblings, I had climbed halfway up a giant cedar —one of the proud, towering monarchs of the Pacific coast— hoping to glimpse the vast and solemn expanse of the ocean. And then I fell.

It was a fall from a height that should have killed me outright. But at the base of that mighty cedar, a cluster of modest spruces seemed to pity my foolishness. They caught me, gently, in their supple arms, and laid me down upon a bed of humus draped with soft green ferns. The impact was brutal, yes — but not fatal. I

remained there, stunned by the merciless drop, cradled in a forest carpet thicker than any imperial rug.

Finally awakened by a throbbing headache, I had staggered home — only to be struck by a vision that left me reeling far more than the pain. There stood my mother, calmly folding laundry, her entire body wrapped in a translucent veil of bluish mist. Around her, a whirlwind of luminous, multicolored lines spiraled downward in tight, concentric circles.

—*My goodness ! What's happening to you, Mom ?*

—*Nothing ! What do you mean ?*

—*Around you... I see this thin smoke, blueish, and these... luminous trajectories.*

—*Oh, come on ! You're crazy; you've fallen on your head ?*

—*Yes. About ten minutes ago.*

Unaware of the unintentional comedy in her retort, she insisted on taking me to a doctor. The man examined me from every conceivable angle — CT scans, X-rays, ultrasounds of lungs, checks on head, neck, shoulders, chest, abdomen, arms, legs. I was charted down to the tiniest lipoma, the loneliest hemorrhoid. A whole panel of educated professionals came to the same brilliant conclusion : nothing was wrong.

And yet, despite all this “*nothing*,” I continued to see the same electric-blue haze, the same swirling cocoons of light surrounding not just my mother, but the nurses, the doctors, everyone. It was like staring into the orbit of a galaxy wrapped around each soul.

I spent long hours scanning myself mentally, anatomizing my sensations, listening inwardly — much as I do now, nailed to this wretched wheelchair by a merciless cerebrovascular accident.

## *Laura's aura*

But long before this paralysis pinned me like an insect in a specimen box, that moss-shod tree had granted me a peculiar gift : *the ability to glimpse the aura of my fellow beings.*

According to our family doctor —who knew nothing of such things but enjoyed speculating like a man inventing a new sport— my neurons had haphazardly rewired themselves, drafting in obscure pathways to compensate for the trauma. This sudden rearrangement had, quite by accident, flung open a door to an entirely different reality.

My retinal cone cells had somehow become attuned to the electric-blue halo, the spectral cocoons wrapping themselves around every human form. To properly distinguish the pale-blue etheric layer, I found I had to look at people from the side, about fifty centimeters off-center. An ophthalmologist later explained, with impressive certainty, that “*the image of such luminous emanations must form just beside the macula of the retina to be perceived clearly.*” I no longer recall why this mattered — but it seemed important at the time.

After a few days, the veil of light thickened and multiplied, weaving itself into a skein of luminous threads that wrapped people in a vast cocoon of clarity. It reminded me of the patterns formed by iron filings around a magnet — only here, the lines emanating from the body's *nimbs* were no longer pale or white but shimmered with vivid, radiant hues. Over time, by studying them closely and from the right angle, I learned to distinguish these spectral traces with increasing precision.

The aura rose to the eyes and arched upward in a brightly colored halo —a kind of nimbus— typically a soft blue or a pale yellow. Above the head burst forth a fountain of light, delicate and symmetrical, like a blossoming lotus. Together, these elements formed a true iridescent display, a prismatic illumination of a thousand colors.

## *Laura's aura*

—*It's an aura ! You can see people's auras*, the doctor exclaimed when I finally confided in him. *You're one of the rare few on earth !*

It took weeks before I could grow accustomed to the glowing trajectories that surrounded everyone I encountered. In the street, amid the throngs of passersby, these multicolored lines twisted and tangled in a mesmerizing chaos. I couldn't help but feel that people must somehow sense this invisible entanglement, this energetic intimacy. I finally understood why I had always felt so uneasy when someone came too close for privacy — within that sacred half-meter of personal space. In crowds, the spirals and arcs of others would weave through my own, forming a dense, pulsing jumble.

At school, on sidewalks, in subway cars — I began to observe the emotional weather of those around me by the colors of their luminous arcs. Slowly, year after year, I learned through trial and intuition to decipher the language of light that orbited human beings like the paths of planets.

I discovered, for example, that the deeper a person's spirituality, the more their halo glowed with a rich saffron-yellow. Perhaps that's why Buddhist monks wear robes of that very shade — it echoes, perhaps even amplifies, the hue of their inner essence. In contrast, those consumed by darker thoughts radiated dull, murky browns. A sickly greenish yellow —like stagnant bile— revealed the presence of liars, hypocrites, and charlatans.

Bright red, I came to associate with strength and vitality, an inherently positive force. And when edged with pale yellow, it marked individuals of great kindness —true Good Samaritans, the likes of Paul-Émile Léger, Raoul Follereau, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, or Jean Tiberghien.

A much longer delay was required before I became truly certain that the hues of an aura are profoundly influenced by the ailments afflicting the organs of the person observed. The brightest

crimson lines fade into a dull, lifeless brown as they pass over a diseased region. It then becomes possible —if one is well-versed in human anatomy— to deduce the condition of the internal terrain, to sense the vitality or decay of the organs hidden beneath the skin.

Ablaze with the thirst for knowledge, I plunged like a man possessed into anatomical encyclopedias, eager to map out the secret engines of our corporeal lives — those tireless, silent organs that sustain both our well-being and our flickering flame of life. By visiting hospitals and those bleak hospices where the forgotten elderly linger on, I gradually taught myself to detect the subtle signs of festering abscesses, of treacherous anthrax, and even those demonic, insidious cancers. These afflictions dim the aura, staining it with murky shadows — just as do emotions like anxiety, rage, and simmering resentment. Each emotion leaves its trace, each disease its spectral hue : always darker, duller, more ominous.



Graced by Providence with such an extraordinary gift — this capacity to glimpse the souls of my fellow beings, to perceive the tides of feeling that surge within their hearts, their nobility, their spiritual essence, their very breath of life— I could not help but ask myself: to what noble cause should I dedicate this wondrous talent ?

It was a staggering faculty, one that allowed me to read, almost infallibly, the state of mind of strangers. I could distinguish the hypocrites, the vile, the blood-stained murderers, the abominable predators. For it is said that men resemble one another in what they conceal, and differ only in what they reveal. I, however, had been granted the immeasurable privilege of perceiving what they strive to hide.

And I can affirm this in all sincerity, for I have confirmed it each and every day since the fateful moment of my incredible



fall from the great cedar. Every day, as we walk through the world, we unknowingly brush past souls of luminous kindness —angelic, extraordinary, sublime. And just as often, we cross paths with monsters : terrifying beings, fit for the gallows, who glance our way with veiled hostility, bitterly resenting the rules of society that forbid them from seizing what they covet, or from silencing us forever. They observe us from behind their masks, resentful of the wealthy adorned in jewels, seething at the sight of every comfort and privilege denied to them. And when they behold beauty —those radiant figures that pass like visions— they do not admire. They covet. They calculate.

This exceptional gift presented me with a dazzling array of career paths — each one enhanced, even revolutionized, by the singular power I then possessed. What police officer, I wondered, wouldn't feel divinely advantaged to sense, in the shifting crowds of a city street, which passerby harbored the spark of criminality — like one of those automatic scanners that can spot a stolen car in a sea of metal ? What judge wouldn't relish the privilege of glimpsing, with piercing clarity, whether the soul before him teetered on the edge of redemption or relapse ? And what physician wouldn't be awed by the ability to diagnose, at a glance, the silent swelling of cerebral edema, the creeping erosion of a prostate tumor, or the stealthy gangrene of a uterine fibroid ? The fabled "complete check-up" would become instant, flawless, infallible.

I was ablaze with the boundless possibilities of this gift — one that had visited me through the sheer absurdity of an accidental fall, a blow to the head so bizarre and fortuitous that I dared not confide it to anyone for fear of sounding insane. And yet, as I've told you, that famous fall somehow tilted the fragile balance of my brain into an alignment more perfect than before.

I wavered for a long time before choosing a path. Medicine. Yes, medicine. The decision came after a torment of sleepless

nights, long deliberations with my dear mother, and more formal consultations with my father —whose opinion, I confess, I didn't truly value, but whose wallet I hoped to access. My mother, sweet and sentimental, had never kept a cent, being far too generous — with herself. My father, a man always yearning for morsels of affection from those around him, agreed to fund the entirety of my education and daily needs. In that moment, he became a useful parent, which is already no small thing.

At twenty-five, a luminous medical student by then, I sometimes looked back with uneasy nostalgia at my childhood and adolescent companions. I found myself wondering, with a twinge of guilt, what they were becoming — and saw that, for the most part, they were becoming nothing at all. Like Romulus and Remus suckling from the she-wolf of disorder, they clung to synthetic paradises —narcotics, gambling, cheap alcohol— that devoured them slowly, offering fleeting serenity in exchange for a future sacrificed. While they numbed themselves into oblivion, we, their supposed equals, had already begun to carve out dazzling destinies.

I saw life—this ferocious meat-grinder—chewing them up with slow, reptilian satisfaction, like an anaconda savoring the demise of its prey. I admit it: I took a sort of pride, not untainted by vanity, in the privileges life had bestowed upon me without any concern for fairness. Like all the fortunate, I clung to the seductive belief that opportunity lies open before everyone. That success is merely a matter of will. “Always choose the best for yourself!” I used to say, like a mantra. “Those who fail, simply chose failure.” It felt true. It felt just. But of course, it was a lie.

Success is the most deceitful teacher of all — it whispers that failure is impossible.

The Great Meat Grinder was about to exact its revenge on my pride, grinding down the grandiose illusion I had of myself —

a self-styled superman already soaring high above my fellow mortals... in my own mind.

My captivating medical studies were meant to stretch on for years—too many years, in fact. But fate intervened: my father exited this world barely two years after pledging to fund my passage into adulthood. His early departure forced me to abandon university. With no degree and no patron, I found myself drifting toward a distant English-speaking island in the Caribbean —known to some as a *tax haven*, to others as the *Olympus of counterfeit diplomas* for wealthy underachievers. There, for a sufficiently large sum, one could *negotiate* a medical degree.

I was compelled to take out a massive loan from a shadowy financial firm to pay an English forger the requisite price for corruption and forgery. To repay these ruinous sums, I needed to start earning quickly — very quickly.

Armed with a degree bought at lightning speed, I returned to the West Coast of Canada and began practicing almost immediately. I adjusted my résumé so that the dates made sense, or at least didn't raise suspicions. Since satisfaction was secondary to income, I focused on a specialty that required minimal medical knowledge beyond the two years I had actually studied. At the suggestion of a colleague, I chose to specialize in abortions — a lucrative and low-competition field. It allowed me to repay my fraudulent debts at record speed and start building a splendid pension fund that, in theory, would support me in a worry-free retirement.

That plan, alas, evaporated faster than a raindrop on a Caribbean sidewalk. Eager to grow my newfound wealth at breakneck speed, I entrusted it to a fund managed by a charismatic fraudster who inspired unwavering confidence among the financially ambitious. Naturally, the best con artists radiate serene trustworthiness, especially to swindlers like myself hoping to double their money in half the time.

## *Laura's aura*

The fund was supposedly investing in Bangladesh — a fertile land for exploiting child labor and impoverished women. My gracious Korean financial advisor, it turned out, had orchestrated a perfectly designed Ponzi scheme to fleece rich Western opportunists who had no qualms about enslaving Bengali children in their quest for higher returns. Had I only seen her in person, I'm convinced her aura would have betrayed her perfidy. But alas, modern technology limited our exchanges to a touch screen — and auras do not pass through glass.

To feed the Danaïdian pit of that fraudulent investment, I had to keep performing abortions, day in and day out. My religious beliefs, not to mention the Hippocratic Oath, (and not the hypocritical oath) stood in utter contradiction to this strange and grisly profession. And so I made superhuman efforts to suppress the waves of revulsion that rose within me each time my scalpel sliced through yet another tiny body — slaughtered, one after the other, in long, soul-draining sessions.

I must now confess, with deep shame, that only my love for financial comfort and security allowed me to endure such spiritual devastation. My conscience cried out — but the sound was muffled by the rustle of banknotes.



Believing that Love could serve as a lasting antidote to my chronic neurasthenia and the psychic afflictions that tormented my soul, a well-meaning friend suggested I get married. I did not yet know that marriage is an adventure that nearly always ends poorly — though some believers, gripped by a mystical masochism, find in the daily scourge of marital life a kind of exaltation. They imagine that these exhausting tribulations will grant them direct access to Paradise, by passing any need to atone in Purgatory.

Like many introverts burdened by a lifelong affliction of pathological shyness, I sought a soulmate among my kin. This led me back to my birthplace, nestled deep in the Rocky Mountains. In some dusty corner of my memory lived a certain Rose, a distant cousin — so impoverished, I reasoned, that she might be unable to decline my proposal.

But when I stepped into her parents' home, I found that Rose had blossomed into a ravishing beauty. This revelation immediately made me hesitant to advance, fearing that her newfound allure might inspire greater expectations — and that my humble offer would earn only a humiliating rebuff.

And yet, Fortune gave me an unexpected hand. My brief visit to the village happened — by the most serendipitous chance — to coincide with the arrival of a traveling wigmaker, a curious tradesman who roamed the alpine hamlets buying long hair from destitute teenagers for a pittance. With these golden harvests, he crafted flamboyant wigs that fetched handsome prices in the boutiques of metropolitan Vancouver.

Rose, radiant and desperate to help her family “put a little butter in the spinach,” was on the verge of selling her magnificent tresses. Seized by an impulse both romantic and opportunistic, I offered the wigmaker a generous outbid and secured the hair for myself. Thus, I became the proud owner of a piece of her person — though not the most charming part — and felt I had gained a strategic advantage in courting the rest.

To my delight, this odd transaction awakened in Rose a lyrical sentimentality. The fact that her hair legally belonged to me seemed to stir her heart with the vapors of poetic romance. I too grew more attached to her. And as Love worked its alchemy, transmuting coincidence into conviction, I found myself a willing slave to this fragile yet burgeoning passion.

## *Laura's aura*

Possession of that golden fragment discouraged rival suitors — few in number amid the desert-like solitude of those high mountain pastures, yet not absent. Chief among them were two young Basque shepherds, Pantxo Zarrandikoetxea and Gaizka Iartzaldebehere, sons of exiles who had fled the horrors of the Spanish Civil War. I remain convinced that the terrifying complexity of their surnames helped tip the delicate scales of Love in my favor.

As for the wedding, my purse —already ravaged by the acquisition of her curls— could not withstand the expenses of a proper celebration. By mutual consent, we opted for concubinage, which, unlike today, had not yet become a mundane arrangement.



To put it bluntly, my existence was far from swathed in rosy hues. The misfortunes of my soul as a physician were swiftly compounded by a singular torment : during my abortion procedures, I could perceive the nascent aura of the unborn child, superimposed upon that of the mother. Through some ineffable premonition, the tiny vortex of that fledgling soul seemed to sense its impending erasure. Indeed, the vivid crimson of its radiance would dim the moment I prepared to terminate its brief intra uterine existence.

At first, I was overcome with horror. I spent sleepless nights tormented, staring at the indifferent moon like one of those old Canadian executioners, whose descent into alcoholism was shaped by the haunting gaze of the condemned. My questions — urgent, anguished— echoed into silence. *"I asked the moon, I told myself, but the moon replied: I'm not used to dealing with cases like yours."*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lyrics borrowed from the French band *Indochine* : */Yes, I am Beelzebub./ A goat in red, a beast in heat./ Yes—yes—I dwell in filth./ reeking of sweat and lust./ I smoke, I drink, I cultivate all the vices./*

## *Laura's aura*

In despair, I sought refuge in artificial paradises — pervitine, that grim narcotic of Nazi courage, which numbed the moral conscience of SS officers. But I soon learned that drugs and alcohol were no loyal allies; they were duplicitous companions, always waiting to smother me in despair and lead me to ruin.

Eventually, I found a rationale to dull the pain. I persuaded myself that I was rendering a service — both to society and to women. To society, whose overpopulated planet groaned under the weight of its famished multitudes; a world where entire continents teemed with children born only to suffer. To women, who, since Eve's mythical fall, had borne the weight of a fabled guilt, endured a millennia-long yoke of injustice, and been reduced to obedient laborers and docile pleasures for men.

True, I was keenly aware that the 150,000 abortions performed each year in Canada did little to sustain the fragile future of a nation already stumbling toward demographic collapse. But I forced myself to forget this truth, lest I join the clamorous chorus of moral accusers whose voices offered nothing but condemnation.

Yet even now, when exhaustion no longer lulls my mind into merciful oblivion, the slightest flicker of insomnia unleashes a horde of night visions : ghostly children with hollow eyes, dancing in solemn silence, while the syncopated beat of some infernal salsa echoes through my skull — music played, I imagine, by the very demon who has taken up residence in my tormented brain.

Ah, how bitterly I lamented my captivity to this grotesque masquerade that nailed me to the pillory of my own conscience! But they haunted me relentlessly — the manes of those tiny beings whose lives I severed. "I hate you! I curse you! You are rotten to the core," they seemed to whisper with spectral malice.

## *Laura's aura*

Some of my thirty thousand homunculi —now adolescents, even adults— appeared in feverish hallucinations to cast their verdicts : fierce reproaches, vicious invective, until I felt myself on the brink of suicidal madness.

To purge these torments, I wielded my rhetoric like a priest brandishing incense — in the name of public utility, of the *Good of Humanity* ! But my true absolution came in generous draughts of Cognac.

And yet, life with my beloved Rose remained peacefully banal. We passed our days steeped in books, and our evenings seated on the secret terrace of a Vancouver café, watching the flow of passers-by on the city's inner streets. As always, I would describe to her the auras that bewitched me. I saw lovers whose halos twisted and collided in savage turbulence, and I surmised their shared life must be a battlefield. But isn't that the common fate of most?

Now and then, I spotted one cloaked in a dull crimson fog, suggestive of homicidal urges. "The murderers walk among us," I told Rose — those invisible thieves of breath, of futures. But... was I not one myself ?



And now—here I am. Time, with its cruel impartiality, has condemned me to stillness. My body, once frantic in its quest for gold, now lies inert. For years, I denied myself even simple joys, in the fevered pursuit of that sublime happiness which lay, for me, in stacking each coin of profit on the glittering summit of my golden mountain. But I always wanted it higher.

When illness finally forced me into retirement, I sought to convert that mountain into a pension — into travel, into pleasure. And that was when the great revelation fell upon me : the gleaming peak of my wealth was nothing but the apex of a Ponzi scheme.



And the swindler? Hardly a villain by global standards — she had spared the innocent Bengalis of Calcutta, and, with undisguised delight, defrauded the likes of me — useless parasites fattened on the sorrows of the world.

In truth, I had lived off human flesh — like the swarms of flies that trail the slow procession of half-burned cadavers floating down the Ganges, to feed the fleshy hilsa fish, which in turn nourish the starving people of Bengal.

Was I any different ?

I am one of those who only express regrets once the damage is done — too late for repentance to be of any real use. Decay has ravaged me, buried my beautiful Rose in despair, and dissolved my immodesty, leaving behind nothing but a fragile ego propped up by scraps of remorse and a semblance of wisdom. Making amends is, paradoxically, easier now. Poverty absolves me of the burden of reparations, and the Ponzi scheme I helped perpetuate only ensnared thieves of my own kind. Besides, I count myself oddly fortunate that this collective anemia of human conscience —which normalized abortion— has not yet extended its desensitized logic to the euthanasia of the elderly. For now, we old wrecks remain tolerated burdens, endured by the saintly caregivers who devote their lives to our decomposing well-being.<sup>1</sup>

At sixty-five, I found myself at a crossroads : either end my life or embrace the indigence I had long feared. Death, in those days, blossomed in my disillusioned mind like a poisonous flower. Many times I was tempted to entrust my fate to the toxic scissors of Atropos. And yet, curiously enough, the idea of my own burial kept me anchored to life. Ordinary mortals may scoff at such grim irrationality, but for over fifty years, I have refused to set foot in a

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<sup>1</sup> For some years now, moreover, the parliaments of Western countries have been trying to pass euthanasia laws, to get rid of the elderly, laws hypocritically called: law to die with dignity.

cemetery — even to honor the dearest of friends. I knew, with an icy certainty, that the only burial I could not avoid would be my own. That one looms ever closer, judging by my desperate condition.

These nocturnal meditations, which I attempt to exorcise with sleepless discipline, return with vengeful clarity in daylight, like flies to a corpse.



The staff at this institution, where I wait —without either hope or impatience— for my own end, attempt, in their own way, to redirect my thoughts toward less funereal contemplations. Most of them are women, and many possess a rare kind of devotion. Their red auras swirl in luminous spirals, radiant proofs of their care and empathy.

My one remaining pleasure here is the quiet observation of Sunday visitors. They parade through the halls for much of the afternoon, as if still honoring the sanctity of what was once a sacred day. My eyes and ears —those last holdouts from the onslaught of programmed obsolescence— remain alert. I am grateful for this. My epiphysis, that tiny conductor of circadian rhythm, has spared me blindness and deafness. I can still imagine, with horror, the torment of having reached this final flicker of life deaf, mute, blind, and paralyzed — like some wilted flower left to rot unseen in a forgotten field.

In my condition, I could almost muster optimism — if only I had the attention of a nurse other than Laura. She is assigned to me five days a week, and I count every one of those days like a prisoner marking the wall. She feeds me by halves, treats me by quarters, and washes me by eighths — fractions of care that never add up to anything whole. I relish her days off more than she does, I suspect, for they liberate me from her corrosive presence.

## *Laura's aura*

There is something in her that unnerves me profoundly. A silent hostility. I can feel it in her touch, read it in her sneer. Her aura, which I cannot help but see, speaks plainly: when near me, it turns the color of rotting wood. I have seen that sickly hue before — in those gripped by loathing or hidden malice. She tends to my grotesque body as if handling something unclean, cursed. I am left with the impression that her disdain might one day become something worse. My heart leaps with dread each time she approaches, and in those panic-fueled moments, I see her aura darken and contract, like a criminal record scrawled in ether.

—*Yes, I fear her!*

And I grieve quietly to be the object of such unspoken hatred — when all I have left to offer the world is my broken, fading self.

Why does she hate me so deeply? What did I ever do — so pitiful, so limp — to deserve such irrational, relentless contempt? Perhaps I remind her of a former lover who wronged her. Bad luck for me. What injustice! (Justice, mind you, demanded by someone who has so often denied it to others!)

Why couldn't I have been assigned a brilliant companion like the famous Stephen Hawking had during his descent into immobility? They say Jane adored him — not because Stephen was the genius, but because *she* was. She, the woman with the forgotten maiden name, supposedly translated his babblings into high science and personal philosophy. It's whispered — by those who claim to know — that it was Jane, not Stephen, who dazzled the world, cloaked in the authority of a fragile man in a wheelchair. Back when women still had to ride the coattails of men to gain universal respect, she slipped into the role of prophetess and ghost-writer.

Rumors (dripping from the stringy lips of the uninformed) allege that Stephen was nothing more than her ventriloquist's

## *Laura's aura*

dummy, the wheeled oracle of Jane's clever monologues. They say she even developed a secret code—*calibrstix*, they call it—to keep up the charade. But that famous secret must never be spoken aloud, lest it offend the eternal pride of his nation—an empire still polishing its myths since William the Bastard—unlike the French, who apologize for everything, even for sins they didn't make.



In the fall, Nature speaks in a language only my solitude understands—through the rustle of two grand maples, whispering to each other with their delicate fingertips whenever the breeze decides to play. When all is still, I hear the babble of the little waterfall in our park. Other days, it's the eternal *friselis* of the northern wind that murmurs through the leaves.

Each weekend, I long for family visits. I watch young lovers kiss with breathless devotion, and even without turning my head, I can recognize the yawns of those slouched around me. Sometimes, I glimpse the ghost of Justin's parents—he's the boy who crashed his motorcycle and, as Louis-Ferdinand Céline would put it, "*began dying at twenty*." On the first Friday of each month, a dutiful daughter-in-law visits her husband's mother. In front of her husband, she performs her affection with touching warmth—but her aura betrays no such sentiment.

Ah, the radiant Julie of Saturdays! Powdered and perfumed like a bouquet of daffodils, she's a vision for my tired eyes. Her legs spring from beneath her brocade skirt like white stamens from a golden flower. Her bust—firm, like a sculpture by François Rude—emerges from a gleaming yellow taffeta bodice, revealing the divine malice of a Creator obsessed with seduction. Julie graces us with coy smiles and silent promises, which of course are never made, never kept. She fills her husband's ears with trills sweeter than songbirds, lips as luscious as wild strawberries.

Richard III would have traded his kingdom for a horse — how many of my final hours would I surrender just to taste that forbidden fruit once more? Her scent alone sends my degenerate body into siege.



I am deeply sensitive to perfumes. They are the messengers of our most tender memories, summoning in an instant the ghosts of those we once loved. A single fragrance can transport me to that small grove nestled in the *Monts-Notre-Dame*, just behind *Rivière-du-Loup*. There, long ago, my lips bestowed their first kiss upon the chosen one of my heart — Lyne the cuddler. A gentle memory that drifts now through the anemia of my fading mind.

When one of my *alter egos* perishes in this geriatric hospice, I feel a complex blend of sorrow and strange delight: sorrow for having lost a companion in decay, and a guilty pleasure at having once again evaded the embrace of the *Grim Reaper*.

Just last week, I caught sight of Queen Claude, now reduced to a mere clutch of bones, slumped deep in her wheelchair, she, who once danced in Winnipeg among thirty pairs of legs with *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens*. When I first arrived here, she still held on to the last shimmer of twilight, pirouetting with a flirtatious hip thrust that made my fork tremble mid-air. But time, like dry sand slipping through arthritic fingers, has taken her too. Now, her hair lies long dead, tied under her chin like a hangman's noose. In two hollow sockets, dark as artesian wells, her eyes flicker faintly with the improbable hope of a second life. Her cheeks have hollowed with every betrayal, every wrinkle, every white hair, every tear she's crushed with her frail fists.

Queen Claude —whose name no longer evokes the sweet green plums of my childhood— nurtures her sorrows as a florist tends their most delicate flowers.

## *Laura's aura*

"Forget your worries," I pleaded once. "Otherwise, they will devour you from within."



The nurse's aide assigned to me — Laura — is a presence both unavoidable and opaque. Since my stroke, which left me mute and paraplegic, I've never spoken to her. Yet I observe her carefully, especially her aura, that strange halo I alone seem able to see. Laura's is dominantly purple, a shade that suggests a formidable arrogance. Strangely, her aura darkens each time she approaches me. This tells me all I need to know : she attends to me with profound reluctance, struggling with a visceral aversion to my crumbling body.

I do not blame her — entirely. My filth is not of my choosing, but of her negligence. Most mornings, she either neglects or deliberately skips my hygiene routine, repulsed as she is by my decay. This lapse, however, has terrible consequences. It causes me unbearable itching in the most private of regions. And my paralysis renders me incapable of scratching or relieving the torment — it becomes a daily form of slow torture.

In the early days of her arrival, I still had partial control over my left arm. One day, tormented by the itching, I tried to scratch myself. She caught me in the act. But instead of seeking to understand the gesture — born not of concupiscence, but of raw physical suffering — she interpreted it through her own prejudices. Her expression twisted in disgust, and she spat :

*—Ugh! This filthy old man is a disgusting pervert... A rapist, maybe even a pedophile! I'll teach him to respect others !*

From that moment on, I became, in her eyes, less than human — a thing. Not merely a senile man in decline, but a foul, contemptible creature. Since then, she's harbored a tenacious ha-

## *Laura's aura*

tred toward the remnants of my personhood, careful always to conceal it before others. But we old ones, robbed of our primary senses, often awaken a sixth. Mine tells me to beware.

Yet how does one defend oneself, when one is little more than a wreck of flesh, an algae tossed and mocked by the tide ?

My dismal fate becomes even more palpable on Saturdays and Sundays—those blessed days when Laura takes her leave. Her absence fills me with an indescribable sense of relief, even joy. In her place comes Daisy, a diligent and caring substitute who performs her duties with the dedication of a novice nun tending to a sacred relic. She bathes me with a meticulous devotion, a kind of guilty fervor, and feeds me with a spoon, her hand soft and maternal, as if I were a fragile newborn. On these days, my famished stomach—usually growling in solo protest—finally finds peace, silencing its a cappella lament for sustenance.

Yet even Daisy has her flaws. She insists on speaking to me as one might address a toddler, a habit that irritates me to no end :  
*—So! Father Cloclo is hungry? He's going to gobble up his lovely porridge with little bits of milled bread? Yum-yum, what a treat for our gourmet!*

I would still rather be infantilized by Daisy than tormented by Laura.

With Laura, I live in apprehension. Her unpredictable moods and the menacing tones of her aura—which turns an ominous shade when she approaches my bed—fill me with a dread I cannot shake. Trapped in this sickly, atrophied body, a quadriplegic prisoner of flesh, I feel defenseless and exposed. Over time, Laura's aura has sunk into a dingy brown, what I've come to call the "*gray of Moorish decay*." My own aura, which I catch glimpses of in the periphery of my vision, shivers with hues of panic and fear.

## *Laura's aura*

I remember a morning all too clearly. After changing my undergarments, she muttered :

—*This vile old fart! He's as dull as a dead rat, and his shit — ugh! stickier than agar-agar and stinks like a rotting carcass !*

— *Better make a note of that!* someone joked.

Without hesitation, Laura scribbled on the chart pinned to my tablet : "*Stools excessively firm to the extreme. Persistent odor despite repeated hygiene measures.*"

Then came a warning :

—*Laura, you'd better clean him more thoroughly. I heard the supervisor was furious yesterday.*

— *Why ? What now ?*

— *The doctor suspects erythema on the buttocks and penis... says he's not being washed properly.*

— *Damn it ! That man disgusts me so much !*

She shot me a look full of venom, as though I were personally to blame for her sloth. When she does wash me —which is rare— it's with visible contempt, grimacing the entire time.

—*Oh, those bastards ! I do clean him !* she muttered under her breath. *Let me talk to the doctor — I'll tell him what I think! Not that it matters — he won't last long anyway.*

—*How can you be so sure?*

—*He's already half-dead! Just look at him. Good. I'll fetch the mop water.*

Yes, I'm having a hard time of it. Especially when I notice how her aura continues to darken, turning into a bitter, walnut-stained brown whenever she throws me one of those needle-sharp glares that pierce like steel knitting pins.



## *Laura's aura*

A few days after that heartbreaking episode, Laura resumed her graveyard shift, as she did every Wednesday.

That evening, the cold was of a rare and merciless kind — Siberian, almost. Vancouver, usually cradled by the mild oceanic breath of the *Kuroshio Current* and protected by the *Rocky Mountains*, had suddenly surrendered to an arctic front. The frozen day faded reluctantly into an even icier night, settling in as early as 4 p.m. beneath a leaden sky.

To keep despair at bay, I kept whispering to myself that dawn would come — sooner or later. After a sleepless night, the day would once again infiltrate through the blinds, and I would greet it like a watchman welcoming his relief: “*At last—daylight, and life!*” I’d think. Even the itching of *balanitis* would seem less cruel at the thought that only two more days remained before Daisy —my weekend savior— would come to wash me thoroughly. What joy! She would no doubt resume her usual baby talk: “*So! Father Cloclo soiled his little willy again? Shall we clean it all up? Oh yes, he’s going to feel so good!*” By now, I hardly cared how she spoke to me — being scrubbed clean was heavenly enough.

But that night was unlike any other.

Laura prowled through the room in near-total darkness. She had turned off the lights and now wandered hesitantly, as if dreading a step she was forced to take. What step? I longed to know and dreaded it at once. Though her aura —murky, almost ochre— was dim, my cursed sight could still trace it clearly. I saw her drifting soundlessly around my medical bed, gliding over the linoleum like a ghost. She had laid me there after the usual frugal oatmeal dinner. Oddly, tonight she had washed me with an unusual thoroughness. I dared not rejoice.

Then, suddenly, she grabbed the bed of my paralyzed neighbor and rolled it slowly out of the room.

## *Laura's aura*

A chill pierced me. What was she doing ? Removing a witness ?

Her aura trailed behind her like a torn shroud—thickening, darkening, until it seemed soaked in horror itself.

I tried to gauge how much time was left before dawn — just as Monsieur Seguin's goat must have, facing the wolf in the night. Despite the menace looming silently in the dark, I still hoped. Hoped she might spare this frail, voiceless old man who couldn't harm a fly. Hoped for mercy. Hoped for a miracle.

In those moments, I thought of the fetuses whose auras once quivered under the arc of my scalpel. They had trembled, too, at the edge of death — anxious bursts of Veronese green flashing around them as I prepared my blade.

Now it was my turn.

I watched the room from my narrow field of vision. I could not speak. I could not move. A puppet with cut strings. Only my eyes remained alive, likely bulging with panic, trying desperately to pierce the dark veil and read her true intent.

Her shadow shifted again. Her aura —faint, muddy— still glowed, transforming her into a phantom, a bearer of light. I shivered at the thought: *Lucifer*, after all, means “bearer-of-light.”

How had I come to this ? Had I been dragged into this descent by fate alone ? Predestined ? I believed so. Man is not free. His genetic code sets the path like steel rails. I did nothing more than what my fate dictated. Destiny had led me, like a cow to the slaughterhouse.

A misfortune was approaching, that much was certain. And I could do nothing to stop it. Fear darkened my own aura. It flickered into hues I'd seen before — those same green shivers of terror

## *Laura's aura*

I'd seen around children whose lives I ended under the guise of medical necessity.

Now, *I* was the one quivering.

She came closer and leaned over my bed.

In the faint phosphorescence of her aura, I could finally make out her features. And I swear — I saw a face forged in Hell. A diabolical sneer twisted her lips. Her eyes glistened with hatred.

And then I heard her voice — clear, cold, like Torquemada reincarnated :

*—You, my little nincompoop... you'll pay for those victim eyes. You're going to hell... tonight! I swear it! Tabarnak!*

She wanted me to know. The monster ! Dying is not as terrifying as knowing precisely *when* you'll die.

I was paralyzed. I couldn't scream. Couldn't beg. Couldn't reach for help. Trapped in this nightmare, this stinking psychic mud, sinking slowly.

A colossal anguish seized my chest, clutched my heart in a merciless grip. My ventricles and auricles were crushed like pulp between skeletal fingers. Despair drilled into my skull like a spike of steel — rigid, icy, final.

I felt abandoned, like a young gazelle strangled in the jaws of a lion, while its kin fled, spared, indifferent. The doomed creature knows it has mere minutes —endless and fleeting at once— before death finishes the job and tears it from a world that, though cruel, still gleams with the bittersweet glow of the known.

What could I do?

I summoned a desperate effort to scream, to move —even just a twitch— but only managed to part my lips in vain. No sound

## *Laura's aura*

escaped. I watched, helpless, as my halo dimmed, tainted by despair and terror. There was nothing left but to die, and to hope that this psychopath would someday die too, so I could meet her in the Beyond : *"I'll be waiting for you at the edge of Eternity... just to push you away!"* I whispered silently in my head. I forgot, of course, that I had little hope of reaching the right portal myself.

Laura, cloaked in a halo now dulled to an anthracite gloom, yanked the sheet and blanket from my twisted, arthritic body with one abrupt gesture, and flung them at my feet. I watched her walk to the window, open it wide, then silently slip out through the door, closing it behind her with ghostly caution.



Then the icy breath of the Yukon and Alaska poured through the gaping window, uninterrupted. Within minutes, I felt the marble chill of death creeping into me. I thought of my five children. My six grandchildren. My long-departed mother and father. *Perhaps they will be there to greet me... when I arrive on the far shore of the Ocean of Life.* The frost climbed up my legs, gnawed at me like a beast. I remembered the good and the evil I had done over the course of my life, hoping the Supreme Judge — *if He exists*— would not be too severe with me.

I had always been indulgent and gentle with myself. Much less so with others.

My conscience, hesitant and creaking like a weary staircase, climbed to the attic of memory, where everything slept or stirred : the luminous and the shameful, the moments of light and of shadow. The regrets I hoped to hide. The virtues I wished to present first, like a good suit for Judgment Day.

To my surprise, death didn't frighten me. Before its cold gaze, I stood as tall as I could. I tried to meet it with contempt, to look it squarely in the face, so that Lady Death might lose a bit of

her dreadful arrogance. She then seemed ridiculous — no more frightening than the shadows of night that dissolve as you approach. I did not flee. I stepped forward. I pulled back their black veils one by one and discovered, beneath the terrifying masks, only sad tyrants, laughable in their impotence.

Then —suddenly— I saw my dear parents. They had done their best to raise me: clumsily, yes, but with love. And my five children stood before me too — draped in both their virtues and their faults — smiling softly, as if to say: *Bon voyage*.

A thousand piercing thoughts stabbed at my mind like a cobbler's awl. I swatted them away a hundred times; they returned a hundred and one — an endless swarm of hungry flies. Already, the cold was rising to my belly.

My breath —thin, frail— formed a faint mist that vanished instantly, devoured by the night's freezing gust, rushing through the room to chase away the last molecules of warmth.

What more could I have done to ensure this crime did not go unpunished? In a final act of defiance, I bit down hard on my tongue — so violently that I nearly severed the tip. Blood burst forth, flooding my mouth in warm torrents. I spat it out onto the sheet before me, hoping the doctor, faced with this grotesque display, might be compelled to investigate more thoroughly the obscure cause of my death.

The Siberian cold crept into my chest, numbing me from within. I felt myself slipping into a kind of hibernation. Then, just as suddenly, a searing inferno engulfed me — a viscous black tar that scorched like molten pitch. In a flash, I remembered the boiling pits of Caina, where traitors to kin and kind suffer eternal punishment.

And I understood : I was meant to bring life — not ruin.

I called out for Death, but Death, that fickle seductress, refused to answer. Why, oh why, was I not born a Hindu ? The idea of successive reincarnations must surely dull the edge of terror. After so many lives, dying must become no more than a tedious formality, devoid of dread.

Others passed beside me — figures cloaked in murmur, drifting onward. They surrounded me in solemn procession, like a flock of sheep in silent transhumance toward mysterious mountain pastures. Their hushed voices rose and fell in fractured snippets, the half-heard dialogues of those on the edge of the Beyond.

The heat of Caina faded. Death's hand grew glacial, tyrannizing my poor, foolish body. I thought of my son. His image blurred and dissolved as the full, merciless cold of the other world seeped into my head, my mind, my marrow. Life had become a punishment. Death, at last, a consoling accomplice — welcomed without regret.

Fragments of Aragon's verse flared in my fading consciousness: *"There is something deep down I do not understand ;This fear of dying that people have at home."*

My tongue, nearly severed, ached with excruciating cruelty. I was like a mute man, soaked in *huanglian*, enduring the bitterness of silence that no words can ease.

And then—without transition—the tunnel.

The one so often whispered of, glowing at its far end with a blinding brilliance. I slid toward it without effort. I needed only to *will* forward, and I moved — like a leaf borne by wind or water.

The faint murmur ahead swelled to a roar, then a monstrous clamor. A crowd — vast, convulsing — rose before me. They boiled like a living sea, a cacophony of rage. Faces twisted by hatred. Fists raised. Insults spat with venom. They screamed their aversion, their judgment, their condemnation.

## *Laura's aura*

There were too many to count.

At least **30,000**.



"It could only be this tall, handsome brown, slender and dark as a night owl, who always sat at the back of the classroom on the left."

The letters

-5-

### The Stolen Letter

Socialism —whether of the "*national*" variety under Hitler or the "*international*" variant favored by Stalin— dragged Europe back into the abyss of primitive barbarism, nearly extinguishing the peoples of an entire continent. At the dawn of World War II, the diabolical collusion between these two totalitarian regimes — Nazism and Communism— precipitated the conflict. Their infamous alliance, forged by the *German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact* of 1939 and reinforced by the supplementary treaty of 1940, gave Hitler a free hand to attack France by neutralizing any eastern threat.

Throughout the war and its chaotic aftermath, Europe became the stage for unspeakable horrors. So-called "exceptional" tribunals, often hastily assembled and ideologically driven, condemned thousands to death for the mere suspicion of "collaboration" with the nazis. In truth, many of the accusers acted less out of Justice than guilt, desperate to absolve themselves for their prior apathy or silent complicity. Those sentenced were frequently executed with a single shot to the head — discreetly, almost bureaucratically.



Among these shadow trials was a tragic episode that unfolded in a remote Pyrenean forest near Saint-Béat. There, in the winter of 1944–1945, a group of armed Resistance fighters known as the *Francs-tireurs et partisans* (FTP), of Soviet-Communist allegiance, administered their own version of justice. Young men, often former militiamen barely out of adolescence, were dragged before an impromptu tribunal: a Communist schoolteacher who



would later become the town's mayor, a union boss, and a Spanish Republican exile.

They were no judges. They were executioners cloaked in ideology.

The outcome was never in doubt. The accused —shackled teenagers trembling in a nearby log cabin— were denied any legal defense. The verdicts, always the same, were delivered swiftly and followed by the death sentence within minutes. These crimes, committed in the name of anti-fascism, were chilling echoes of the very Nazi atrocities they sought to condemn.

Yet in a grotesque pantomime of compassion, the condemned were granted a final, fleeting dignity: the right to write a farewell letter in pencil to their families. They were assured —lied to— that these desperate scribbles would reach the hands of grieving parents.

But the letters were never sent.

The leader of this FTP cell had already received his instructions from Moscow: he was to transition from the shadows into public life, embarking on a political career in postwar France. These tragic letters, if discovered, could tarnish his ambitions and jeopardize the Soviet utopia he was tasked to help construct — a utopia of "*Singing Tomorrows*," in which only the proletariat would find salvation, while the entrepreneurial and the wealthy would be banished to the inferno of capitalist sin.

And so, the letters were quietly locked away in the safe of his private home — a house newly adorned with a tricolor sign painted by a local artist, proudly proclaiming :

*"Honor to our Mayor  
Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."*



Half a century later, I encountered in Vancouver the only son of that Communist mayor. The old man had died shortly after the Berlin Wall fell — not from a bullet in the skull like those he'd condemned in the woods of Saint-Béat, but peacefully, on a top-of-the-line mattress, surrounded by comfort and denial.

In his final days, he reportedly came to see the monstrous illusions of the ideologies he had once served — Communism, Nazism, and every dogmatic fanaticism that had turned the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a valley of death and ruin.

Europe, in the wake of such devastation, committed a slow suicide — not with bombs or bullets, but with empty cradles. Failing to replace themselves, Europeans seemed to conclude, in a gesture of collective penance, that the world might be better off without them. It was a kind of demographic *hara-kiri*.

“We will sow chaos in your lands,” said the voices of ideological vengeance. “We will let drug lords roam free in your streets. We will always extend our hand... but only to the enemy.”

Such was the proclamation of Louis Aragon, the French Communist writer and Soviet mouthpiece, who praised betrayal as virtue. His name now graces countless streets across France — a traitor memorialized, as if treason were a form of heroism.

Christian, the son of that Pyrenean politician, confided in me one day the existence of a bundle of heartbreaking letters. He allowed me to read them. As I did, bitter tears welled in my eyes — tears drawn not only by the raw suffering they contained, but by the ignominy of the fanaticism that religious and political doctrines, when pushed to extremes, sow in the heart of humanity. Instead of uniting people, these dogmas divide them, driving wedges of hatred where there should have been harmony.

*Laura's aura*

I urged Christian to publish the letters, to denounce the monstrosity of that cursed era, just as so many have rightly exposed the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. But he refused. He feared tarnishing his father's legacy — a man his neighbors revered as a Hero of the Liberation, a paladin of moral righteousness.

So, I stole one.

Because I believed the world had to hear at least one of those cries — one voice rising from the depths of horror, echoing from the Hercynian rocks of the Pyrenees where so many young men now lie buried, misled by the deadly labyrinth of politics. Here is what that letter said:

**Pierre C...** (18 years old)

*Dear Maman,*

They've just sentenced me to die.

I, who since childhood had dreamed of one day dying for my Fatherland... am now condemned, they tell me, because I have betrayed it.

They told me to write a final letter. And it is to you, dearest Mama, that I want to address it — not forgetting Papa, Adrien, Thérèse, and little Cyprien, of course. But I know that it is you who will understand best what I am trying to say, and so you can pass these words to all those I love.

I cannot ask you not to grieve — no mother can hold back tears for her child. But tell me, Maman, what did I do that was so wrong ?

I never killed anyone. I never denounced anyone. I never betrayed the communists hiding in the region, nor the Jews who lived in secret on many Pyrenean farms — everyone knew, and most of us protected them. Even the gendarmes who trained the

maquisards in secret, left-wing or right-wing, or the smugglers who crossed the mountains with Jews and Gaullist fugitives — we all knew them, we all watched over them.

My only “crime” was wearing the Militia uniform... for a few months. I believed in the words of Marshal Pétain, the hero of Verdun, and Admiral Darlan, whose Ministry I briefly guarded at the Château de Nérac. How could I have imagined such men were traitors? How could I not have believed them?

The head of the tribunal shouted at me, “You must die for collaborating with the Germans.”

So I said:

*“But I never even saw a German!”*

“Shut up!” the judge roared. “You’re just a bastard—and you’re going to die like a bastard. It’s too late to play the plaster saint, the pious hypocrite. You should have thought about that when you joined that bloody Pétain Militia ! Bastard! Scum like you don’t deserve to live!”

The trial was nothing but a tirade of insults. Every time I tried to defend myself, the judges only yelled louder. I was never assigned a lawyer. They didn’t want a trial — they wanted my death.

The three “judges” across from me repeated the same phrase over and over : *“Bastard, you’re going to die like a dog!”*

I know they will kill me as soon as I finish this letter.

And I would never stop writing to you if I could, never stop talking to you, never stop telling you how deeply I love you, Maman. How I regret not having lived long enough to give back even a fraction of what you gave me. I wanted to give you grandchildren one day... to take care of you when you grew old.

## *Laura's aura*

You used to say: "*Pierre, you will be the cane that supports my old age.*" But I know Adrien, Thérèse, and Cyprien will take care of you and Papa.

You gave me life. You washed my diapers, carried me in your arms, and endured my childish whims. And I wasn't always good to you. I used to sneak away from chores, avoid the work in the fields. For that, I beg your forgiveness.

And to Adrien, Thérèse, and Cyprien — I also ask forgiveness, for the times I scolded them just for disturbing my peace. I should have been more patient, a better big brother.

*Confronted with this final judgment that I faced today, I want to behave as bravely as Dad. He who always told me : "there is no point in crying or imploring; You have to do your duty, grit your teeth, and that's it. It is true that it would be cowardly to cry, and anyway it would be useless. They would be too happy about it. For they are determined to blind vengeance. I want to die standing up and with my eyes open like Dad would. I have always tried to react to events with as much calmness, dignity and courage as Dad. Do you remember, Dad, when you stood in front of the dog that wanted to bite me? You looked at him coldly without moving and the dog did not dare to attack you. That's how I want to look at those who are going to kill me. I don't think it will stop them, but at least they will see that I know how to die like a man, like a Frenchman.*

*I have to end up now because they come to get me to die. They probably think I'm writing too long. Goodbye Maman, Farewell! I will see you on the other shores in a few years. I charge you to embrace on my behalf all the family and friends. I ask God for forgiveness for all the evil I have done. Let him not be harsh on me when I appear before him in a few moments. Our Lady of Lourdes, plead my case before God.*

*I love you all, as much as a heart can hold.*

*Your son, Pierre.*

*Laura's aura*

*PS: Take diligent care of my good Picard. He has always been an obedient dog and I hope to see him again in Paradise too.*



-6-

### **The Mystery Rendezvous**

When Véronique first saw him — that young man about to sit in her section — her heart stumbled, as if the air had thickened. His blonde hair, artfully tousled, framed a face of such exquisite delicacy it could have softened even the most exacting woman's heart — save, perhaps, for those who prefer to tether their fate to swaggering phalocrats, men who exude virility from every pore and who, sooner or later, will impose their will through physical or psychological force the moment a woman dares assert her autonomy.

This one — this one was carved from a quieter fire. Yet power was written on him too— in the breadth of his shoulders, the proud lift of his chest, the long rhythm of his limbs. Legs like Ken's — yes, *that* Ken, the ever-gallant suitor of Barbie, impossibly perfect, yet less alive than this real man in worn denim clinging to youth, ripped in all the fashionable places, whispering of privilege and late-night parties on the golden shores of Vancouver's elite.

Above it all, a tailored midnight blazer hugged his form like a second skin stitched from starlight.

And Véronique, caught between breath and dream, could only murmur, "*Wow...*"

He wore tight jeans, true denim from Nîmes, lovingly frayed in all the "right" places, as dictated by the sartorial code of Vancouver's gilded youth. His tailored blazer added just the right touch of distinction, emphasizing every sculpted line of his anatomy.

—*Wow*, Véronique breathed, barely audibly.

Within seconds, several curious young women appeared, peeking furtively through the glass doors of the kitchens and offices. Their excited whispers floated through the air like perfume: “*He’s to die for!*” “*What a snack!*” “*Absolutely stunning...*” “*I’m swooning...*” “*I can’t believe it!*”

—*Wow! Lucky you*, Sophie said to Claire, nudging her with a conspiratorial grin. *You’re going to take care of him? If the inside is as gorgeous as the outside, I swear — I’d marry him on the spot, veil and vows and all.*

—*I think I recognize him*, Claire replied, smoothing a rebellious curl. *Isn’t he the only son of that Vancouver financier — Jim Pat-tison? I heard he’s super sweet, looking for a woman who isn’t after his money. That’s his big issue. That’s why he does these secret dates.*

Claire quickly composed herself. She tamed her unruly hair, straightened her slightly creased uniform, rubbed her lips together to revive the faded lipstick, then summoned her best smile. With a deep breath and a flutter in her chest, she stepped through the swinging door.

—*Good morning ! Can I help you, sir ?*

—*Hello! Do you... ?*

—*Would you like to order something ?*

—*Just a coffee for now. Maybe brunch later... I haven’t decided.*

—*Maybe you’re expecting someone?* Claire indiscreetly inquired, eyes gleaming with curiosity.

—*Yes. A mystery date. Found her through the classifieds. If I like her, we’ll have lunch. Otherwise... just coffee.*



## *Laura's aura*

Claire turned away, heart sinking with a jealous pang for the lucky girl who'd soon bask in the company of this Adonis.

—*It's a blind date !* she shouted as she burst into the kitchen, the swing doors bouncing wildly behind her.

—*Oh, the lucky girl !* she added breathlessly. *He's amazing !*

That's when it hit Sophie — like a mischievous imp darting through her brain. *What if I went instead ?* The idea took hold with electric clarity. Her decision was instant.

—*I'm going to pretend to be the girl.*

—*Yes !* said the chef, instantly onboard. *Take the boss's mink coat — it'll impress him. He looks like middle class. He'll eat it up.*

—*Middle class? Are you kidding? He's rolling in it ! His dad practically owns half of Vancouver... But what if the real girl shows up ?*

—*Take him somewhere else — some fancy restaurant. I'll lend you 200 bucks.*

—*Thanks, you're the best. I'll pay you back. Let me get dressed !*

In just five breathless minutes, Sophie transformed. Dressed and made-up, she slipped out the service door and re-entered — this time through the grand glass entrance, head held high, nerves crackling with excitement.

Luckily, the real mystery date was running late. It's often said that women do well to arrive fashionably behind schedule — to build anticipation. But fate is a tricky thing. Sometimes, it trips over a traffic jam, a missed bus... or the cruel twist of a flat tire.

The three waitresses kept a discreet eye on the merry-go-round through the window. Sophie made her way to the reception desk, scanning the dining room with a curious gaze. Claire approached her with a knowing smile.

—*Madam ? Are you here for a meal or...?*

*Laura's aura*

—*I have a date... with a boy I don't know.*

—*Ah, yes ! He's already here. This way, please.*

Claire led her to the man's table, with Sophie close behind. The stranger stood and extended a polite hand.

—*Jonathan. Good morning.*

—*Sophie... Hello.*

—*Oh! You're not Line?*

—*I never use my real name online.*

Jonathan quickly helped her out of her mink coat, running his hands over it with a little too much interest, then they sat down, face to face. From a distance, Claire watched as, not long after, the couple rose, left a generous \$20 tip, and headed out.

—*Twenty bucks for a coffee ? That guy's rolling in it, Claire muttered.*

—*I just hope my mink comes back in perfect condition, the boss added, watching the pair disappear. I should never have let it go...*



A few minutes later, a young woman entered — stunning, if a bit theatrical. She took a seat by the bay window.

—*Just a coffee, please! I'm waiting for someone. It's a mystery rendezvous. If I like the boy, we'll have lunch.*

—*Was it scheduled for ten past noon ?* Claire asked with a sly smile the woman mistook for friendliness.

—*No, noon exactly. But he's not here yet, right? Anyway, making men wait isn't a bad thing. You have to keep them wanting more. They deserve it !*

—*You're absolutely right, Claire laughed. They do deserve it !*



That evening, around 10:00, Claire tried to call Sophie for news about the unexpected romance — but she wasn't home. Out of caution, Claire didn't try her cell.

The next morning, Sophie showed up to work, ready to share every detail of her afternoon and evening with the dashing Adonis. He liked her a lot, she said. He had already set up another rendezvous — same time, same place.

*—I think I hit the jackpot. He's incredibly generous. Wants to pay for everything.*

*—Hold on to that one. Or you'll end up like us — waitressing forever.*

*—Don't worry. Besides, there's no such thing as a small job — only small minds.*

*— Well said ! Claire grinned. But let's be honest — generosity alone doesn't build wealth. What does he do, exactly ?*

*—He's a medical student at UBC.*

*—Oh really? And his parents?*

*—He told me his father is in business, but I heard they practically own half the businesses in Metro Vancouver... like the Desmarais family in Eastern Canada.*

*—You're kidding ! And you ? What did you tell him about yourself ?*

*—Something a little more modest... I said my parents own a dozen Petro-Canada gas stations along the West Coast. And to take care of that, I want to study law.*

*—Very clever, said Claire, clearly savoring the game of romantic make-believe. Listen, you can't always let him pay. You're supposed to be a rich heiress, remember ? You need to play the part;*

## *Laura's aura*

*keep up appearances and refresh your wardrobe. I'll lend you my savings. You can pay me back once you're married. I trust you.*

*—It bothers me to borrow your money...*

*—Yes, and that's admirable ! But think: you have to maintain the lifestyle he believes you lead — at least until he's completely smitten. Then, and only then, you can tell him the truth. The beginning is always the most delicate phase.*

*—Thank you for the advice, you're such a sweetheart. I'll owe you a debt of gratitude! Let's call it an investment... one that'll pay off handsomely for you !*

Without realizing it, the charming Jonathan was, in a way, marrying the entire restaurant staff.



The following week, Sophie borrowed another thousand dollars from Claire, five hundred from Yvon the chef, and Claire even parted with her last five hundred. The boss chipped in with another five hundred, in neat little twenties. The whole team pooled their savings, each of them convinced that this down payment on the future would bloom into shared prosperity.

In just two months, Sophie had spent nearly five thousand dollars—the collective hopes and savings of her circle. But no one seemed worried. Bolstered by Sophie's enthusiasm, they believed this dream wedding would usher in a golden age for them all. After all, investing in love was surely less risky than trading on the NASDAQ, especially during these sluggish economic times.

Everything seemed to be falling into place. Jonathan was clearly preparing to propose. He must have realized he'd found the rare gem—the bird of paradise—beautiful, poised, and above all, not swayed by his wealth. Sophie dreamed of a grand wedding, but

Jonathan insisted he wanted to surprise his parents with a *fait accompli*.

—A *fait accompli*? You mean... they might try to stop you from marrying me ? she asked, alarmed.

—No, no ! Don't worry ! I'm sure they'll adore you. I just want to surprise them, that's all !

What Jonathan didn't know was that Sophie had in store surprises of her own for her soon-to-be in-laws. Judging by her lavish spending, they probably thought she was dripping in wealth. But once the game was over and the curtain fell, Sophie knew she'd have to repay every borrowed cent — with interest.

But she knew now that Jonathan loved her deeply — so deeply, in fact, that even bad news would go down like a spoonful of honey. Her dear grandmother —always brimming with affection and mischief— had once told her with a conspiratorial smile that men are like fish: all you need is to harpoon them with love, and once caught, bound by lust and stunned by desire, you can do with them what you please.

To succeed, however, one had to play it close — very close. Like poker. Like a liar. The comparison, though admittedly a little unflattering to the male species, had always seemed perfectly apt. That grandmother — what a wise woman she was !

Each day, Jonathan came to pick Sophie up in his sleek black Corvette, parking discreetly at the door of a different restaurant from the same chain. She had arranged to be transferred the very next day after their mysterious rendezvous, just to avoid arousing suspicion. He thought her charmingly modest.

She'd told him she received a generous allowance from her parents, on the sole condition that she kept a job. Any job. And Jonathan, romantic to the core, was touched by what he perceived

as the richness of her heart : a wealthy girl who saw no task beneath her.

Each evening, he whisked her away to one of the countless restaurants dotting Metro Vancouver, followed by a show —be it theater, cinema, or some quirky cultural detour— and always ended the night at the cozy little apartment he called his *pied-à-terre*.

That final act of their daily drama lasted no more than twenty minutes. And though Sophie had begun to fall genuinely in love with him, this last scene remained, for her, an ordeal. Jonathan, for all his sweetness, seemed strikingly inexperienced in matters of the flesh. He never even asked how she felt.

Yet in all other things, he was unfailingly tender. He slipped folded bills into her coat pocket, adorned with hand-drawn hearts pierced by Cupid's arrows. He scribbled sweet nothings — "*I love you,*" "*You're the sexiest girl in Vancouver,*" "*You're my life.*" It was as though he gleaned romantic gestures from etiquette manuals or books of relationship advice.

And still, her heart was not entirely content. She remained quietly frustrated, vaguely melancholic, promising herself to raise the matter only once marriage gave her the right to speak more plainly.

In early March, they finally tied the knot in a small, multi-faith chapel in Las Vegas. That same evening, Jonathan phoned his parents in West Vancouver to share the happy news. They were surprised, but warmly invited the newlyweds for dinner that coming Sunday.

Sophie felt her nerves prick. Would they like her? Would she fit into the polished perfection of West Vancouver — the wealthiest municipality in Canada, home to those who, unlike their American counterparts, actually paid their taxes ?

*Laura's aura*

As they drove along the Trans-Canada Highway, weaving through the suburban sprawl of Greater Vancouver and its four million souls, Sophie felt the weight of her secret pressing on her conscience. She turned to him at last and confessed her “little” lie: her parents weren’t wealthy at all. They were simple people, working class, and it would be necessary to pay them a visit — if only out of respect.

—*You’ll be kind to them, won’t you ?* she whispered, her voice barely audible over the hum of the car.

Jonathan was quiet for a long time. His expressions tightened. Then, at last, he spoke.

—*I... I wanted to tell you something too.”*

She turned toward him.

—*Go on.*

—*I mean, unless you were about to say something first—*

—*No, no... please. You first.”*

He hesitated.

—*I need to confess a little misdeed.*

—*Oh ? And what sort of misdeed ? ”*

—*I hope you won’t be too disappointed... ”*

She smiled, running her manicured fingers along the back of his neck.

—*You know I could never be disappointed in you. I love you more than anything in the world.*

He took a deep breath.

—*My parents... they’re very poor. They live on public assistance.*

## *Laura's aura*

It took Sophie almost a minute to grasp the deeper meaning of this confession. Then, little by little, her world of ease, her *castles built in the air* began to collapse in her mind, like the city of Saint-Jean-Vianney in the bowels of the earth<sup>1</sup>. It was not without difficulty, as she tried to hold on to everything:

—*But if you're a university student, how can you afford a luxury car ?*

—*It's a collector's car. Besides, I'm not a student. I couldn't afford the tuition. In fact, I'm unemployed... I had a car accident , and because it was someone else's fault, ICBC gave me a million dollars, of which I only have \$60,000 left. A quarter of that went into legal fees and the rest into bad investments.*

He took on a guilty look...

—*You'll never forgive me, will you ?*

—*Oh, I see ! And you thought that by marrying a rich girl you could pay off your debts and continue to live a gilded and carefree existence ?*

—*I think I really did something wrong?* He continued, wearing the face of a scamp hoping for a quick pardon.

—*If you want my opinion, Jonathan, I think you behaved badly. But I would be wrong to condemn you because I myself wanted to impress you by displaying a wealth that I do not have. I owe \$6,000 to my friends, waitresses like me at the restaurant where we met. I was a waitress there.*

Jonathan stopped the Corvette at the side of the highway. Silently, he leaned his head on the steering wheel for a long time :

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<sup>1</sup>This natural disaster took place on May 4, 1971 on the shores of the Saguenay. Forty houses disappeared with their inhabitants, in the quicksand of a geological collapse.



## *Laura's aura*

*—Listen Sophie, we were both caught at our own game. What to do now ? I've almost exhausted my disability premium, and you're covered in debt. You owe \$6,000 I don't know what you think, but I, for one, know that I love you and that I am ready to continue my life with you and get to work to pay it back.*

She looked at him with a benevolent smile.

*—I love you too. I'm glad you're reacting that way. We will repay the price of our hypocrisy, and only then will we think of ourselves.*

*—In that case, we will both work for each other's happiness ! No more madness!*

*—This project should be that of all couples on earth.*



Paradoxically, their union lasted a lifetime, while around them, love marriages, love at first sight, fiery liaisons dissolved before the ink of the signatures was dry. Because, as the Neapolitans say, who are specialists in the very specific field of the high-voltage of feelings, in the games of love and chance: "*if Love makes time vanish, time also makes Love vanish.*"

But there are always exceptions that confirm and prove the rule !



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**The comeback.**

Pierre soon married a woman named Ginette. Together, they opened a modest bar-brewery that swiftly anchored itself in the neighborhood's routines and rituals. Paul, less driven by ambition — or perhaps simply more skilled in the art of disappearance — drifted away into the silence of another province. His absence deepened over time until he vanished altogether from the lives of those who had once called him brother, son, or friend. Neither Pierre nor Paul made any effort to reconnect. Their twinhood, far from being a sanctuary, had proven unequal to the task of bridging the emotional wreckage left by their childhood. If anything, it only sharpened the ache of disconnection, making the idea of reunion feel more like reopening a wound than healing one.

In Montreal, Pierre and Ginette poured themselves into their enterprise. Within five years, their humble brasserie had grown into a lively spot, complete with a terrace and a small but well-loved restaurant. On the surface, things seemed to flourish. But beneath the varnish of success, the marriage was beginning to rot — silently at first, then with the unmistakable stench of something turning.

Ginette, whose smile had once been radiant behind the bar, now spent her days conjuring dreams of escape. She longed for silence — not the silence of loneliness, but of peace, of freedom from the daily battles that had come to define her life with Pierre. Their arguments were operatic — loud, relentless, and saturated with the earthy poetry of Quebecois obscenities. These perfor-

mances echoed through the aging, blistered walls of the neighborhood like some urban counterpart to the haunted calls of the Qu'Appelle Valley.

Each outburst offered fresh meat to the gossips, who chewed and re-chewed the tales until they became folklore. There was a strange comfort in the Tremblays' chaos: a communal schadenfreude that allowed others to mutter, with no small satisfaction, "*At least we're not them.*"

Craving tenderness — or perhaps simply distraction — Ginette sought solace in a form of "therapy" whose legitimacy was questionable at best. Her practitioner of choice was the neighborhood butcher, a man more skilled with meat than minds. He offered generous discounts on his filet mignon and equally generous liberties with his own ample cuts, always kept just below boiling. Whether this arrangement soothed her nerves is debatable; what's certain is that it only deepened her contempt.

Pierre's presence became intolerable. Worse still, Ginette feared he might claim half the business if they separated — a prospect she could not endure. In her mind, the bar was hers alone : the fruit of her vision, her sweat, her sacrifice. Yes, Pierre had contributed — *played a role*, as she sometimes admitted — but for her, his final scene had long since passed. He ought to have bowed out discreetly, like a ballerina retreating behind the curtain after a final pirouette.

But delusions rarely yield to decorum, and Ginette, like many egotists, mistook the business for her birthright and her husband for a squatter.

Years trickled by — years of rehearsed silences, brittle compromises, and affections turned cold. What had begun as a hopeful union transformed, as so many do, into a quiet purgatory. And if paradise lost is rare, hell at home is all too common.

Eventually, the gods —or perhaps the devils— heard Ginette's fervent prayers. After a long series of altercations, arguments, and even a few physical scuffles (during which Pierre, to Ginette's dismay, managed never to strike her — thwarting her hope to have him locked up for domestic abuse), he finally decided he'd had enough. He disappeared without warning, heading west in search of peace, or at least distance.

Beyond the Rockies, beneath the dying light of a scarlet sunset, Pierre attempted to reinvent himself. He tried his luck panning for gold in rivers already overmined. He found some, yes, but not enough to escape poverty — especially after crossing paths with the predatory ecosystem that springs up around any lucrative trade : charlatans, swindlers, barmaids with sticky fingers, and tax collectors from every branch of government. These parasites, each with an eye on their slice of the pie, bled him dry. The Federal, Provincial, and Municipal wolves took what remained and redistributed it as aid to those who either could not — or would not — tire themselves with work.

Disillusioned, Pierre gave up his pickaxe and rented out his shoulders to a Rocky Mountain mining company, joining the graveyard shift — that bleak fraternity of men who labor while the rest of the world sleeps. He who once thought of himself as socially awkward, perhaps even unlikable, was greeted on his first day with backslaps, winks, and crude jokes — a brotherhood bound by sweat and shared hardship :

—*Oh! So you're back already?* croaked a miner with a voice scratched raw by years of tobacco, beer, narcotics, and what sounded like untreated tuberculosis. He gave Pierre a hearty slap on the shoulder.

Pierre, visibly taken aback, raised his eyebrows and replied, putting emphasis on the postposition :

*Laura's aura*

—*Back?* How could I be *back* if I've never worked a night shift in my life?

The miner narrowed his eyes, squinting suspiciously.

—*What kind of nonsense is that? Are you drunk already?*

Another one, older and more cynical, chimed in with a snort :

—*Short memory or are you just plain dumb ?*

Pierre bristled :

—*I'm neither insane nor drunk! I just arrived at this mine !*

But the three miners exchanged strange glances, as if to silently agree that he might be losing his marbles. Pierre lost his patience.

—*What's wrong with you people ? This is the first time I've ever set foot in a mine. You don't even know me !*

They studied him more closely now, with growing unease. Pierre pressed them, voice rising with a mix of indignation and disbelief :

—*I swear you don't know me ! Come on, say my name ! If you know me so well, tell me my name !*

—Tremblay, replied two or three of them in unison.

Now it was Pierre's turn to freeze. He stammered:

—But... h-how do you know me ? I've never laid eyes on any of you !

—Well, you're Paul Tremblay, aren't you? offered a younger miner helpfully.

—No... *Pierre! Paul's my twin brother. Wait... How do you know him?*

## *Laura's aura*

And so, to everyone's astonishment, the truth emerged: Paul, his long-lost twin, worked the *day shift* at the very same mine. Extraordinary coincidence !



In these bizarre and almost magical circumstances, the two brothers were finally reunited. Bonds long severed by their parents' divorce were rekindled — familiarity reborn in the depths of the earth, where estrangement had once buried their fraternal connection.

In a world where “out of sight, out of mind” often held true, they exchanged stories of the winding roads their lives had taken. Paul had drifted through difficult times in Vancouver and Surrey before landing this job in the mine — grueling work, but decently paid. Still, the price was steep : a slow and merciless poisoning by dust, mercury vapors, and other insidious by-products of metal extraction. But isn't life itself the most fatal of all poisons ? After all, it has a 100% mortality rate.

Pierre spoke of his own descent — of marital misery, constant domestic warfare, and his eventual escape into oblivion and, finally, peace.

Paul, incredulous, exploded :

—But why the hell did you leave without claiming your share of the bar-brewery? That business is worth a fortune ! The restaurant too. You're entitled to half of it all !

Pierre sighed, a mixture of weariness and serenity softening his face.

—*Ginette could never afford it. We're talking five million dollars.*

—*That's what banks are for !* Paul snapped. *You really aren't the sharpest pickaxe in the mine, brother. Ginette could've taken out a loan. You just handed it all over like some enlightened monk ?*

—*I didn't want war, Paul. I wanted peace. And now I have it. No more guerrilla warfare, no more courtroom drama. Let her keep it all. I don't care. I'm done.*

Paul fumed, but Pierre remained immovable, his mind made up. He had no desire to return to Montreal, and even entertained dreams of moving halfway across the world to Australia.

—*Don't bring it up again, Paul, he warned. That chapter is closed. Let her keep the house, the bar, the kitchen sink. If that makes her happy, so be it.*



But Paul couldn't bear to see his brother robbed of everything. Quietly, a wild idea began to ferment in his brain. Then, one day, he unveiled his plan :

—*Pierre, don't worry. You won't have to lift a finger. If you don't want your five million back, I do—on your behalf. We look enough alike to fool a mirror. I'll go to Montreal, pretend to be you, claim what's rightfully yours... and return.*

—*That's madness,* Pierre muttered, but his brother wasn't listening.

Paul had already begun absorbing Pierre's mannerisms — his way of speaking, the cadences of his voice, the small, unconscious gestures that punctuated his sentences. He filled notebooks with hurried scrawl, interrogated acquaintances with obsessive zeal, practiced his brother's signature until even Pierre might have mistaken it for his own. In time, Paul became so uncannily convincing that they no longer seemed merely twins — they were mirror images cast in opposing light.

Then came Paul's annual leave. The moment was ripe.

He packed a modest suitcase and boarded a berth on the *Transcontinental VIA Rail*, that long steel serpent that slithered eastward through the jagged veins of the Rockies, threaded snowy passes and fir-cloaked valleys, until the landscape unspooled into the hypnotic flatness of the Prairies — an ocean of wheat beneath a cathedral of sky. At last, the terrain rippled again, rising into the brooding silhouettes of the Canadian Shield.

Throughout the journey, Paul rehearsed his role, line by line, scene by scene. He believed himself ready.

But as the train emerged from the final tunnel into Montreal's *Gare Centrale* —bathed in the ashen light of a childhood half-remembered— emotion struck with the violence of a thunder-clap. His chest tightened, his senses flared. A taxi whisked him through the city to the brasserie, where the script, rehearsed to perfection, would either hold — or unravel.

Inside, Ginette sat at the register like a wary sphinx. When she looked up and saw him —her husband's double— she froze, as if seized by divine wrath. Her face contorted, mirroring with eerie precision the famously sour expression of Monsieur Bertin in *Ingres' portrait*.

—*Ah! So you're back now? What the hell are you doing here ?* she hissed, the words catching in her throat.

—*Take a wild guess.*

—*You want to move back in ?*

—*Why not? I'm home, aren't I ?*

Her fury ignited like dry tinder. She pointed a talon-like nail at his chest — a long, curved crescent glinting like an Arabic janbiya.

—*Listen to me, you damned fool !*



But beneath the venom, something trembled. A flicker of panic pulsed behind her eyes. Her rage was not the rage of certainty, but of fear — fear that this ghost from the past had returned to haunt her... or worse, to reclaim his half of what she had come to see as hers alone. The business. The brasserie. The pie —her pie— now in peril.

And then, as if struck by sudden enlightenment, her face softened. The storm passed. Her features relaxed into a smile that seemed almost genuine. Paul watched, fascinated, as she transformed — reed bending in the wind, not breaking.

She spoke with syrupy warmth, the kind reserved for old friends or dangerous guests:

*—My God, Pierre... There's no need to make a scene. Let's start fresh. You must be starving. Come, sit down—I'll ask Henri to make you a proper steak-frites.*

*“Ah! She's switching tactics, Paul thought. She sees I've got the law on my side. She's trying charm now. Fine. Let her try.”*

The afternoon unfolded peacefully. Ginette became once more the sweet, solicitous woman she must have been, briefly, at the beginning of her marriage to Pierre. That evening, Paul retired to the guest bedroom on his own initiative. She didn't insist. She let him go, dignified, distant. No allusions to intimacy, no misplaced tenderness. But her gentle tone, her apparent goodwill, filled him with *cautious hope*.

Then came the surprise.

She appeared at the door, bearing a steaming plate of sautéed mushrooms and a cup of chamomile tea.

*—Here you go, love. The jet lag must be brutal. These will help. Eat up, and wash it down with this. You'll sleep like a baby.*

## *Laura's aura*

She even kissed him — on the forehead. Just a brief brush of the lips, but it made his heart flutter. “*My brother will be very surprised, he thought with a grin. She clearly loves him. Maybe they do have a future again...*”

And yet — the mushrooms.

A shadow crept into his thoughts. Somewhere, in a comic strip or perhaps a forgotten documentary, he had read about Emperor Claudius, who once had Messalina executed to avoid betrayal, only to be poisoned by his next wife, Agrippina... with mushrooms. *Lethal mushrooms.*

“*Misplaced trust, Paul muttered to himself. Don't be an idiot. She probably doesn't want to kill you. But just in case...*”

He rose unsteadily, tiptoed to the bathroom, and flushed the entire dish down the toilet. Then he chuckled to himself in the mirror :

—*There. If she did try something, she'll think I ate every bite. Maybe she'll even think I'm immune and give up. That'll show her!*

Satisfied with his little ploy, he returned to bed and drank the herbal tea. It tasted bitter but pleasant. Within minutes, he felt sleep descend like a velvet curtain. His limbs grew heavy, his eyelids leaden. *Jet lag*, he told himself.

But he didn't fall asleep — not fully. Instead, he hovered in that strange half-world, like an opioid dream. He could hear everything: the whisper of tires on the street below, the wood creaking under some invisible footstep, the house breathing softly in the dark.

He tried to lift his arm to check his watch. Nothing. It felt like iron, fused to the mattress. He couldn't move. Not even a twitch. Something was wrong.

Suddenly, he distinctly heard the bedroom door creak open. "Crac!"

Then came the dry, metallic click of the old ceramic light switch. Behind his closed eyelids, a pink haze bloomed, flecked with white sparks. He tried to open his eyes — but couldn't.

A few muffled sounds followed. Then, an ear pressed against his chest. That unmistakable scent : "Chanel No. 5. Ginette."

An adhesive strip was pressed over his lips. Before he could utter the slightest protest or move a single muscle, his wrists were seized and bound with a thin cord so tight its bite burned through his skin. Then came a sharp pinch to the nose — hard, cruel. He began to suffocate.

Ginette's voice, low and venomous, hissed in his ear :

*—You really thought I'd let you waltz back into my life and take over, without a word ? You made a fatal mistake, Pierre Tremblay. Bon voyage !*

So it was the herbal tea.

A jolt of terror rushed through him. He tried to scream, to pray, to explain — to plead that he wasn't Pierre at all, but Paul ! But what's the point ; no sound escaped his gagged mouth. As the air drained from his lungs, death's shadow loomed — slow and inevitable, like a body sinking in tar.

Then came a voice — male, muffled, but laced with cruel amusement :

*—This imbecile thought it was the mushrooms! I saw him toss some sauce by the toilet. He really believed he'd outfoxed us.*

*—He never imagined it was the herbal tea, purred Ginette. The perfect touch.*

And with that, darkness claimed him.



Beyond the Rockies, Pierre waited. Days unraveled into weeks. By the second month, pride gave way to dread, and he hired a private investigator. The search dragged on through the humid stretch of summer.

At last, they found Paul — beneath a young weeping willow in the brasserie's backyard.

The grave had been prepared hours before his death — ostensibly, Ginette had told the neighbors, for a *salix babylonica*. A poetic flourish.

One sharp-eyed neighbor grew suspicious after spotting Ginette and the chef — her new “companion” — digging well into the night. They were enlarging the hole. She watched as they lowered a large bundle wrapped in garbage bags.

By morning, a sapling stood in its place, rustling gently in the breeze, as if offering benediction to the earth's new secret.

Pierre would, one day, recall a line from *Almanach des Toi-lettes*, May 2<sup>nd</sup>: “*When I die, plant a willow at my grave,*” wrote Alfred de Musset.

A weeping willow, of course.

By the time the neighbor finally came forward, the case had already begun to unravel. The investigator — ever the showman — concocted a spectacle worthy of the theatre: Pierre himself would appear — sudden, silent, spectral — before Ginette. A brother returned from the abyss, a twin reborn to accuse.

It was all captured on film.

—*You killed me, Ginette... but I've come back from hell to punish you.*

## *Laura's aura*

Ginette froze. The blood drained from her face. As if seized by instinct, she ran to the window overlooking the garden, her eyes fixed on the base of the willow.

That single, involuntary gesture was all the proof the authorities needed.

Even before the police unearthed the body, Paul's grave had been betrayed — by the reflex of guilt, and the primal terror of a ghost.

On the advice of her lawyer, Ginette crafted her defense : Paul, she claimed, had attacked her. He had threatened to rape her if she didn't submit by morning.

Grotesque. Convenient. And disturbingly persuasive.

With the backing of a militant feminist organization and a trial that riveted the public, Ginette was handed a mere two-year sentence for manslaughter.

And so ended the tragic tale of Pierre and Paul Tremblay — twins undone by fate, mistaken identity, and a woman with a lethal gift for closure.

The case captivated Montreal, back when it still stood as the beating heart of Canadian grandeur.



Paul Tremblay



Pierre Tremblay

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### **The Grad Reunion**

One of the most poignant moments of my teaching career unfolded at a graduation reunion held twenty years after my students had left the shelter of high school. I had known them at the tender, unknowing age when carefreeness still cloaked the future in illusion.

I had been invited to their original graduation ceremony — a lavish affair steeped in pomp and circumstance — hosted in Vancouver's most prestigious hotel : *Le Méridien*. I still recall them vividly: adolescents barely emerged from childhood, clad stiffly in tuxedos or gliding in iridescent gowns.

The girls, teetering on impossible heels, often stumbled over ruffles and lace, collapsing with theatrical elegance onto the plush crimson carpet of the grand ballroom. The velvet-draped walls bore witness to their naïve exuberance.

They were radiant, their youthful features painted in enthusiastic hues —carmine, coral, vermilion, even daring shades of purple— that heightened their innocence rather than their sophistication. Outside, white limousines as long as city buses lined up like royal carriages, delivering them one by one like debutantes to a fabled ball.

They stepped out laughing, radiant, utterly certain of their charm, their invincibility, their predestined brilliance — as though a chorus of benevolent fairies had already arranged their triumphs.

But the future owes nothing to dreams. It must be earned — and often painfully. They would learn this, each in their time.



Two decades slipped by, quietly, inexorably. The golden certainties of youth had faded, eroded like the ice sculptures of *Quebec's Winter Carnival* beneath spring's first breath. The gleaming limousines had long reverted to pumpkins. As for me, the years had etched lines across my brow and planted creaks in my joints — reminders that age bestows not only wisdom but weariness.

Then, one afternoon, an invitation arrived — a card summoning me to a reunion of my former students, now firmly embedded in adulthood, to mark the twentieth anniversary of their graduation. The venue ? The Surrey Inn — a modest motel with delusions of grandeur. A far cry from *Le Méridien*, and the symbolic chasm between the two could hardly be overlooked.

I was moved by the invitation, though not without unease. Would I recognize them ? Would they recognize me ? Time is a merciless sculptor. I feared that a failure to recall a face might wound more than it should. I also knew, from experience, that while a graduation is a spectacle of promise, a reunion is often a reckoning. Years of decisions — wise, reckless, or merely routine — leave their indelible traces. Life, ultimately, reveals itself.

And so, we come to that evening — twenty years later.



On Friday, December 20th, I made my way to the *Surrey Inn*. A host guided me to a private room overlooking King George-the-Fifth Avenue. Earlier that day, I had rummaged through a dusty drawer, looking for an old class photo. Among the scattered relics of my past — snapshots like drifting asteroids from the firmament of memory — I found the image I was seeking.

*Laura's aura*

As my eyes scanned the four neat rows of young faces, names and memories bubbled to the surface, warming my heart like the first tremors before water reaches a boil. On the back of the photo, I had written each name carefully, and was pleased to see that my long-term memory remained intact enough to match faces to their labels.

The first guests began to arrive. A tall, very pretty blonde woman entered the room with an air of confidence and walked straight up to me.

—*Bonjour Monsieur Castex! Comment allez-vous ?*

I stared for a moment, puzzled—and then, like a flash of light:

—*Jennifer ?*

—*Yes!* she smiled, and hugged me warmly.

—*I'm so happy to see you, she said. You haven't changed a bit !*

—*Thank you for the flattery, I replied, but you — you've changed a lot. You're stunning !*

I didn't have to ask what she did — she offered it proudly:

—*I work for Immigration Canada. My French comes in very handy.*

—*I'm thrilled to hear that. You were such a diligent student. I always believed you'd do well.*

Then a group of men entered, bantering loudly and laughing. Their voices dropped to deep, self-assured tones, as if adulthood demanded resonance. I recognized them at once—Brent, Mark, Jeremy, and Chris. They spoke only in English now.

—*How are you, Mr. Castex ?* Brent said, shaking my hand warmly.

—*Hey ! Your English has improved, I teased. Have you forgotten your French ?*



—*Oh no, he's going to give me detention, Brent joked. "Ten minutes after class, Brent! Write a hundred times : We must speak French in class !*

Everyone laughed. Mark chimed in, his French tinged with a thick English accent:

—*I should be in the Guinness Book for most after-school punishments. I copied the entire science textbook three times...I could've recited it from memory!*

—*Well, I said, "at least it made you good at science, right ? Do you remember the bull's eye dissections ? You were particularly stubborn back then ! But tell me, why have you lost the proper pronunciation of 'R' and 'U' ? You used to speak so well !*

—*Because I am stubborn, he admitted. To fit in with the French Immersion kids, I started imitating their bad accents. Now I'm stuck with it !*

—*Same here, Jeremy added.*

—*What a pity, said a girl with a voice still marked by an impeccable accent.*

The evening had gotten off to a lively start. One by one, the alumni arrived, greeted by bursts of laughter and joyous exclamations as we tried to recognize each other, peering through the masks of time. Curiosity filled the room, mingled with an unspoken hope — each of us wished, silently, not to be the least accomplished among our former peers.

As each newcomer announced their profession, a ripple passed through the crowd — subtle, but palpable. Inwardly, we each felt a flicker of satisfaction or a sting of envy.

Everyone had a story, and naturally, the favorites were those involving playful pranks on the teachers.

Brett was particularly animated. He couldn't stop reliving the tricks he had pulled on me back in the day.

—*It's amazing how often I didn't do my homework. Cool! I always had a great excuse and a note signed by my mom. Except... I forged them all myself!* he confessed, grinning with boyish pride and punctuating each tale with an enthusiastic "*Cool!*"

The room erupted in laughter at his delight. But I, perhaps the target of a few too many of those tricks, started to feel a faint annoyance creep in.

—*Oh, how mischievous you were! And what are you doing now? What's your profession?* I asked, with a touch of irony.

His smile faltered. For a moment, it seemed he might snap.

—*Let's just talk about the good old days*, he said firmly. *Forget the present.*

Later, I learned he'd worked a string of odd jobs — a "*jack-of-all-trades, master of none*," as they say — most recently at K Mart. He'd just been fired by a former classmate who, now a manager, hadn't forgotten the relentless teasing Brett had once inflicted on him in school. Apparently, Brett had been hiding in the warehouse to avoid work. It reminded me of how he used to vanish into the library to skip class.

Now, he had three children, and his wife was preparing to leave him. He claimed the dismissal was revenge, pure and simple. The irony didn't escape me, nor did the memory of the poster (for bullies) I had once pinned to our classroom wall: "*Respect the nerds—one day, one of them will probably be your boss.*"

—*Hey, have you heard about Michael?* Amber shouted suddenly, breaking the silence Brett had left behind. *He's just been arrested. Murder! Apparently for drugs.*

Her announcement, intended to redirect the conversation, only made it darker. I began to wonder if we should've limited our reminiscing to those who had done well — at least in the conventional, socially-accepted sense.

Michael's face came back to me: a quiet, withdrawn boy, often alone. He was one of those cast aside by classmates, relegated to the periphery of the class's complex social hierarchy.

Like any miniature society, the classroom had its ruling class, its rebels, its scapegoats, its nerds — brilliant but mocked, out of jealousy— and its loners, often hiding deeper wounds.

Some of those isolated children bore silent scars : neglect, abuse, abandonment. You could see it in their eyes, in their restlessness, their sudden tears. Michael had been one of them. He never handed in homework unless I practically begged and scolded him in equal measure. His parents, separated and self-absorbed, never once showed up to a parent-teacher meeting.

The girls, for their part, formed two or three tight-knit clans, each ruled by a "queen" — my term for the girl who held sway over the rest. Around her revolved courtesans, desperate to stay in her favor. Even the parents got involved, inviting these queens over for sleepovers, hoping to secure their child's place in the social circle.

The loners, though, received no such invitations — only ridicule and indifference.

Nicole, however, was a different breed. A rebel from day one. She'd tear up papers, scatter scraps around her desk, pick her nose just to repel her neighbors. Within minutes, she would be alone, the center of a wasteland. It was her way of saying, *I choose solitude. I reject your fake friendship.*

Nicole came to the Grad Reunion. And to her —and my— quiet delight, she now held a respectable job in the Federal Administration. Most of her former classmates took her contact info. It had taken twenty years, but she was finally accepted.

First crushes bloomed in those classrooms, too. When I saw Derek walk in, I couldn't help but recall his awkward childhood infatuation with the perfect Michelle. He'd fumble with her desk just to get her attention, even if it earned her scorn. Any attention was better than none.

Naturally, I asked:

—*Do you know what became of Michelle ?*

—*Yes, he replied without hesitation. She's a nurse in Surrey. Divorced, two kids. She couldn't make it tonight.*

Of course he knew.

In a writing assignment once, Michelle had predicted her own future: "*At 40, I'll probably be divorced.*" Half the girls had written the same. A curious self-fulfilling prophecy.

—*She was your sweetheart, wasn't she ?*

—*Who told you that ?*

—*Your mother.*

—*My mother ?*

—*Yes. She once came to ask who Michelle was — the girl you cried for every night on your Mom's shoulder.*

Erica arrived with her wife. She had always tried to stand out, with her close-cropped hair and a defiant attitude. "*My mother wanted a boy,*" she had once told me. On her first day in class, I had to double-check the attendance sheet to know if she was a girl — though even that, these days, doesn't settle much.

And then Cathy walked in. The once-round caterpillar had transformed into a graceful butterfly. Stunning.

Johnny, once an expert manipulator of both parents and teachers, stayed only briefly. Life had caught up to him. His schemes —once charming— had become his downfall. Divorced parents often try to win their child's love by siding with them against each other, but in Johnny's case, it only bred deceit. He slipped out early, unwilling to face the scrutiny of his more successful peers. He saw, perhaps, that this reunion was orchestrated mostly by the high achievers, eager to bask in admiration.

Quentin, a former bully, now spoke with a softened tone, life having taught him the humility school never could.

Aïda and Nika, brilliant African twins who once outshone the entire class, hadn't come. Rumor had it they were pursuing elite degrees in the United States.

And then Gena walked in.

Once, after I had scolded her for poor grades, she had told me —seriously, at twelve years old— that she planned to marry a rich man, divorce him swiftly, and keep half his wealth. "*Then*, she had said, *I'll find the man of my life.*" The law, after all, allowed such schemes. I'd heard many things from students over the years—but that one still echoed.



It was a memorable and eye-opening evening, one that revealed, among other things, a quiet but undeniable truth: with few exceptions, those who had worked diligently in school now lived without major material concerns. The others, however, bore the consequences of their indolence, often at the expense of their families.

## *Laura's aura*

As for the three incurable slackers from those days — they hadn't changed. They now lived on public assistance, euphemistically called *Social Welfare*, a program intended as an expression of national solidarity.

And so, those who once toiled over their lessons continue today to earn, through honest effort, not only their own daily bread but also that of these three shameless freeloaders.

In my heart of hearts, I would have preferred to keep my head buried in the sand, clinging to the comforting illusion that all my former students had found happiness.



Earlier that day, I had rummaged through a dusty drawer, looking for an old class photo. Among the scattered relics of my past — snapshots like drifting asteroids from the firmament of memory — I found the image I was seeking.

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**The twins**

Jealousy is the most corrosive of all evils, and the one for which we feel the least compassion. La Rochefoucauld was right to pin it so precisely in his *Maxims*. Nothing rings truer. And few are more susceptible to that silent torment than those cursed with a twin.

The greatest misfortune of having a twin is not the double crib or the shared birthdays, but the relentless comparisons. With cheerful cruelty and casual malice, people take pleasure in playing spot-the-difference.

They scrutinize you like matching antiques —measuring intellect, evaluating sensitivity, predicting success, weighing strength, ranking beauty. As if we were nothing more than objects for display. Or lab rats.

—*How can you be so lazy when your twin is so hardworking?* scolds the well-meaning teacher, oblivious to the damage.

—*I can't believe how messy you are—your sister's a model of order and discipline !* adds the father, blind to the harm his words inflict.

And God forbid you answer back. If you're not the golden child, don't you dare show resentment. Expressing anger only earns you a harsher sentence.

—*Oh, so now you're jealous of your twin ? I didn't know you had that vice too! What's next ? Cain and Abel ?*

## *Laura's aura*

And then, with theatrical solemnity, someone will recount for the thousandth time the bloody legend that has been mangled by Sunday School and moralists alike.

Back then, Roger —the unloved twin— was still chasing the illusion of brotherhood. He hadn't yet learned that perfection, once idolized, becomes poison to the soul.

You never catch the ideal. It recedes like the horizon : a shimmering trick played by fate. And trying to become someone else —especially someone everyone already loves— is a doomed mission. All that's left is to grit your teeth and train your lips into the semblance of a smile.



Fate, that cruel choreographer of human lives, had dealt Roger the dirtiest hand. From the moment they were born, it was clear: Gilles, his twin, had won the genetic lottery.

—*My God, exclaimed the neighbors, peering into the cradle, this one radiates health. He must've taken everything from poor Roger !*

—*So which one is older ?*

—*Twins, yes, but one always comes first,* came the reply.

—*Roger... by twenty minutes.*

—*Ah, then Gilles must be the smarter one,* a neighbor declared with the confidence of a self-proclaimed oracle. *The youngest is always the most gifted!*

Even their mother joined in the comparison game, sighing :

—*Roger looks like my mother-in-law. Gilles, though — he's the very image of me!*

From then on, everything conspired in Gilles's favor. That trivial lead of twenty minutes —the ironic “gift” from capricious



## *Laura's aura*

Destiny— would haunt Roger forever. Gilles was celebrated: strong, charming, precociously wise. Roger became the subject of whispered concern, the object of pity disguised as encouragement.

His mother, in misguided benevolence, always held up Gilles as the shining standard :

*—Try to be more like your brother.*

But how do you become the sun when you're cast in shadow?

So the twins grew up. And with age came divergence. Unable to reach the impossible standard set by Gilles, Roger began to walk deliberately in the opposite direction — not just to assert himself, but perhaps also to exact a quiet revenge on the world that never stopped comparing.

While Gilles acted with integrity, Roger flirted with theft and lies. The more Gilles studied, the more Roger wallowed in laziness. Gilles gave alms to the poor; Roger chased beggars away like vermin.

With time, their traits hardened like wet plaster turned to stone. The community adored Gilles, and merely tolerated Roger. Even strangers couldn't resist the comic contrast. One day, while Roger sat hidden in the garden, he overheard a visitor laugh and say:

*—The only time Roger came before his brother was the day they were born. And I'm sure Gilles let him go first — out of courtesy. He's so generous, so adorable...*

Everyone chuckled. Everyone except Roger. Behind the hedge, his fists clenched and his eyes turned to flint.



Years passed swiftly for the two brothers, as impatient time pushed their lives forward with the same force that drives a sailboat

into the wind. The twins grew, blossomed into adolescence, and revealed their true natures. Roger's character —rebellious, miserly, and cruel— seemed to assert itself more each day. He brought his parents little joy, who, by contrast, could only deepen their affection for the generous-hearted Gilles.

And yet, dear reader, do not imagine their parents consciously favored one over the other. Not at all. On the contrary, striving to be good parents, they made every effort to conceal their partiality. In fact, they lavished Roger with new clothes, toys, and money — anything to ensure he never felt slighted, at least in material terms.

But Roger's ingratitude knew no bounds. The more he was indulged, the more aggressive, jealous, and vindictive he became. His mouth produced only venom — especially when speaking of his brother. It was as though he believed he could elevate himself by tearing Gilles down. He seemed possessed by something dark, perhaps the devil himself.



Shortly after the First World War, their father passed away — departed, as some optimists say, for a better world. Owning two pulp mills in the *Saint-Maurice Valley*, he left behind a legacy which their mother, now widowed, divided between her sons. Gilles received the factory in La Tuque; Roger inherited the one in Saint-Léonard-de-Mauricie.

The villagers of La Tuque, upon learning that Gilles would lead their main industry, congratulated themselves on their good fortune. In contrast, the people of Saint-Léonard-de-Mauricie were gripped with unease at the prospect of Roger's arrival. Everyone in a twenty-kilometre radius knew the twins — if not personally, at least by reputation.

But fate enjoys its ironies. Contrary to all expectations, Roger underwent a startling transformation. The indolent youth became a diligent man : serious, methodical, and inventive. He took his new role with utmost gravity, and his enterprise flourished. Even the skeptical townsfolk had to admit they had misjudged him.

Gilles too ran his factory with talent and care — but with a style all his own. He remained humble, approachable, and compassionate. Some cynical minds, steeped in ideological resentment, claimed his generosity was nothing but clever management — that by greasing the wheels (and the palms), he merely kept the machine running smoothly to inflate his surplus-value.

But Gilles was not such a man. He truly cared for the people who depended on him, seeing himself —quietly— as their benefactor, their *paterfamilias*, their patriarch. Not that he would ever have admitted it. He feared being accused of paternalism, a sin in the eyes of those who deny that an employer might possess a heart.

At every wedding, birth, or misfortune, a thoughtful gift would arrive from “*Monsieur Gilles*,” as he was affectionately called. When a worker lost a leg to a machine or a man his hands in an accident, Gilles personally ensured they received generous compensation from the company’s insurance — much to the chagrin of the insurer, who promptly doubled the premiums. Gilles winced, but paid. Human dignity came before cost.

Roger’s management was of a different stripe. He ruled his factory with an iron fist. Nothing escaped his gaze or ears. He detected the lazy, the inefficient, the defiant, with uncanny precision — as if he had eyes in every office, ears in every locker room. His decisions were as absolute as the wrath of an Old Testament God, and he enjoyed the fear he inspired.

*Oderint dum metuant* — “Let them hate me, so long as they fear me,” he would quote with relish. These were the words of Caligula, which he had been forced to copy a thousand times during

his unhappy years at the Externat classique of Trois-Rivières. They had become his motto.

The unproductive —the injured, the pregnant, the aging—were unceremoniously dismissed. Under his rule, productivity doubled every three years. The factory ran like a war machine: no one ever sick, no one ever late. At day's end, workers still lingered twenty minutes after the siren had blared. At Gilles's factory, by contrast, the building was empty before the last note had faded.

When an accident occurred under Roger's watch, he spared no effort to deny liability. The company's pet doctor—a decrepit bonesetter with a shaky license—declared the injured always fit for work, thus saving the factory money at the expense of justice. Many workers left without a dime, broken in body and spirit.



Years rolled on. Roger's factory thrived, profits reinvested and multiplied. Gilles's business, however, carried the cost of compassion : disabled workers, elderly fathers, single mothers. They were a heavy burden, but Gilles couldn't abandon them.

In the region, Gilles was loved like a saint. Roger, feared like a tyrant :

*—He exploits the worker. He cares for nothing but his profits.*

Then came the economic crisis.

The two mills responded to the blow in radically different ways. Roger's operation weathered the storm without faltering. Gilles's, already stretched thin, began to sink like a wounded bird.

Desperate, Gilles turned to the banks. He needed money to patch the leaks, to keep the lifeboat afloat. But the bankers were unmoved.

*—Your factory needs restructuring, they told him.*

—Restructuring ? What exactly do you mean ?

—Too many non-essential staff. Cut them. Lay them off, and we'll finance the rest.

Gilles hesitated. “

—But I can't throw these people out. They've given me everything.

—“You don't have to do it yourself. Hire a downsizer. That's how it's done now. Outsiders do the dirty work. For a hefty fee it's true, they eliminate all those you want to get rid of, without any danger of reprisals and violence against you. And your reputation remains intact, untouched. You're not the bad guy ! Your hands stay clean.

They described these so-called *degreasers of staff* — hulking men with double chins and neutral expressions, corporate hit-men who executed mass layoffs with surgical detachment. Gilles was repulsed.

—*One such downsizer, they said, had made millions shedding jobs, only to be swindled later in a failed overseas investment. No one cried for him, the banker sneered.*

But Gilles couldn't do it. He refused to tarnish the reputation he had worked a lifetime to build. And so, the inevitable came : *bankruptcy*. The factory was shuttered, the assets seized, the village bled dry. Families left *en masse* to seek work elsewhere. La Tuque, once vibrant, fell silent.

Roger's town, by contrast, continued to prosper — until the night of July 6.

That night, his factory went up in flames. Roger perished in the inferno. The culprit was soon caught : a father of five, fired after a workplace injury.

“*Unfairly,*” he said. And perhaps he was right.

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**The crossroads**

Some sharp minds have claimed that if a man could kill by mere mental focus —without fear of reprisal from earthly justice—the world would soon find itself dangerously depopulated. Fortunately, such grim experiments remain impossible outside of fiction. But there is one moment in history when deadly vengeance may be executed with relative impunity : *war*.

Soldiers know this well. Many despotic officers or petty tyrant in uniform —those who, in peacetime, issue orders steeped in cruelty, injustice, or arbitrary malice— suddenly transform into models of kindness and tact when war breaks out. They are well aware that, once battle begins, the first bullet fired by a wronged subordinate may be destined not for the enemy, but for them.

How many soldiers, how many captains, supposedly killed *on the Field of Honor*, were in fact struck by friendly fire — from behind ? Shot not by the enemy's guns, but by the very men they once humiliated. They were shot in the back. But they were not cowards.

The fate of Lieutenant Marius Hautberg is a chilling case in point, illuminating these grim realities that do little to ennoble the human soul.



At eighteen, Marius fell madly in love. It is often said that a man does not truly emerge from childhood until he has loved deeply — or married. For Marius, love was the threshold of adulthood.

But his joy was short-lived. His parents disapproved of the match with a cold finality. The girl, though kind and lovely, did not come from the same social or economic background. She was not the daughter of a miller — and that, in the family's narrow world, was an unpardonable flaw. A miller's son, they believed, must marry a miller's daughter. Love had no place in such equations ; it could only distort the sacred arithmetic of familial profit. Marriage was a transaction — an alliance forged between balances, not hearts.

Refusing to yield to this mercantile logic, Marius made a bold and painful choice. He renounced the security of inheritance and resolved to carve out a destiny of his own. He enlisted in the army — determined not only to escape, but to rise. In the militarized atmosphere of the interwar years, the rank of officer offered not only honor, but emancipation.

In taking command of his own fate, Marius began to forge himself anew. Pride and ambition drove him; discipline became his creed. His rise was meteoric. He ranked first in the corporal's exam, again as a sergeant, and was soon selected for officer training. He nearly topped his class. Before long, the coveted stripes of a lieutenant adorned his uniform.

His superiors praised his intelligence, his natural leadership, and his unyielding discipline. They saw in him the makings of a brilliant officer — one who had willed himself into existence without ever climbing the marble staircases of Saint-Cyr, West Point, or Sandhurst. He was not born into the officer class; he had claimed it.

And he could not help but notice how many of those academy-trained officers carried themselves with an air of inherited entitlement. How many of them, feather-bedded by pedigree, would have faltered during a single night raid — let alone kept pace with the swiftness of his thought ?

The realization was sobering. And galvanizing. He grew more exacting — first with himself, then with those around him. He judged his superiors by the same stern standard he applied to his own actions, offering respect only when it was earned. When he encountered incompetence or cowardice, he did not hesitate to adopt a stance that bordered on insolence.

It did not go unnoticed.



Outside, the roar of artillery stiffened the very air with its incessant vibration.

Lieutenant Marius Hautberg couldn't help but think of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. The thunder of guns seemed to echo its martial crescendos — an opera of steel.

War had broken out. Lieutenant Hautberg was posted to Alsace to command Company 47/1 of the *Divisional Engineers*. With a shortage of captains, the most capable lieutenants were handed command. During the "Phoney War," he supervised the construction of bunkers and casemates, reinforcing the Maginot Line — a serpentine fortress stretching from Sedan to Menton, built to repel any German or Italian advance.

In May 1940, Marius was granted leave to mark the birth of his daughter, Marie-France. But Destiny — parsimonious and cruel — would not permit long happiness. He had scarcely begun to savor the serenity of home and fatherhood when orders arrived: he was to rejoin his unit immediately.

The *Blitzkrieg* had begun. Waves of Nazi panzers, their crews pumped full of methamphetamine (the drug of courage), surged through France, crushing all in their path. The French and British armies, caught off guard, had already begun their retreat. Without warning their Allies, the British pulled back to Dunkirk,



leaving behind 2,500 artillery pieces and nearly as many armored vehicles. Two French infantry divisions were sacrificed to shield their retreat, holding the line while the British vanished across the Channel.

Hautberg rejoined his battalion near the River Somme, south of Péronne. The next morning, his commanding officer, Major Gabrielli —a former colleague from the Military Academy—summoned the officers to headquarters.

In the distance, French and German artillery traded blows like rival gods raining fire. It was a High Mass of iron and thunder. The great organs of the heavy guns groaned with a Gregorian rage ; machine guns stuttered like rosary beads counting the dead. The chaos would pause — only to return, more violent, more absolute.

Major Gabrielli, poised and soft-spoken, issued his orders with the composure expected of an officer :

—Your mission, Hautberg, is to mine the crossroads at the southern edge of the village. Execute the task as soon as the battalion disengages.

In an instant, Hautberg understood. One didn't need a diploma from the École Militaire to see the futility. The crossroads lay in open country, flat and defenseless. Blowing it up would do little to impede the German panzers. Their wide caterpillar tracks would simply roll around it, across farmland and fields. If anything, the detour might offer them a scenic diversion.

For Hautberg's company, however —thirty horse-drawn, two-wheeled engineering wagons— the destroyed road would be catastrophic. They would sink into the muddy furrows like beetles in tar. It was the tactical equivalent of sawing off the branch on which one sits.

His thoughts swirled. Should he speak ? Point out, politely, the absurdity ? Or should he obey in silence, as a soldier must ?

Discipline was the spine of the army. And amid retreat, perhaps dissent was too costly.

Still, he could not shake the suspicion that Gabrielli —despite his polished manners and refined speech— was prone to whimsical judgment.

And how many lives, Marius wondered, had already been lost to such fatal whims ?

Was not the retreat itself the gravestone of their commanders' vanity ? ...of his catastrophic incompetence ?

Gabrielli, Hautberg suspected, simply wanted to be seen doing *something* — to leave a paper trail that would later allow him to claim he had done everything possible to stem the tide.

Outside, the cannons roared. Hautberg thought, involuntarily, of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. And then, grimmer thoughts intruded : what would happen to his men —three hundred lives entrusted to him— if this meaningless destruction left them stranded in the mud, easy prey for the drug-fueled Nazi juggernaut ?<sup>1</sup> Could he, in good conscience, carry out such an order?

He stepped forward.

—*Mon commandant...*? the lieutenant said hesitantly.

—*Yes, Hautberg?* Gabrielli replied, raising his thick eyebrows.

—*Don't you think, sir, that destroying this crossroads won't meaningfully slow the enemy? There's nothing to stop them from bypassing it. But this same act will completely block thousands of Belgian, Dutch, French, and Luxembourg refugees fleeing the fighting ... I'm ready to sacrifice myself and my men if it helps delay the Germans. Truly, I am. But might it not be wiser to mine a more*

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<sup>1</sup> Reference to the fact that the German army provided invading troops with pervitin, a methamphetamine that eliminated fear and fatigue.

*strategically located junction—perhaps here, on Hill 234? It seems—*

He pointed to a map, finger extended toward the modest elevation marked at 1:80,000 scale. But when he raised his head again, his words froze.

Major Gabrielli was already walking out.

The officers fell silent, eyes drifting to the open window. In the courtyard below, Gabrielli climbed into a black Peugeot 202, slammed the door, and sped off with a shriek of tires.

Lieutenant Hautberg swallowed hard.

*—You've offended him,* whispered a fellow officer. *But I'm glad he didn't double down and re-issue the order.* This will prevent us from carrying out an act that I would describe not only as foolishly useless, but, as you rightly pointed out, an act of outright barbarism — one that would fall on the heads of refugees trudging down this road, without the slightest hindrance to the German panzers.

*—The meeting is adjourned,* replied Lieutenant Hautberg, unwilling to escalate matters further after his superior's biting rebuke. *Let's return to the platoon's HQ.*



Later that afternoon, Lieutenant Hautberg sat alone at his platoon headquarters when the commander's car pulled up. A flicker of unease ran through him. The senior officer emerged, his face lit with a wide, almost too cheerful smile. The vague apprehension that had been gnawing at Hautberg's nerves dissipated, though not entirely.

*—Hello, Hautberg ! All good ?* said the commander with an affable tone.

*—Nothing to report, sir.*

—You're alone ?

—Yes, my commander.

—*I've just come from Battalion HQ, the commander continued, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret. There's a little issue... We'd like some intelligence about the situation five kilometers north of the village. He pointed to a spot on the map. Could you do a little reconnaissance? It would be a great help.*

—*At once, sir. I'll send Sergeant Dulac..."*

—*Mm, no!* The commander interrupted with a slight shake of the head. *This is too important for a non-commissioned officer. I want you to go. I need first-hand information.*

—*As you wish, sir.*

—*Report directly to Battalion HQ once you return. I'll be waiting.*

There was something unsettling about this vague mission. An undefined tension gnawed at the edges of Hautberg's mind. But he dared not speak up. That very morning, he had questioned one of the commander's decisions. Best not to push things further.

—*Yes, sir !*

—*Good. Leave immediately. Time is running out. The news from the front is bad. The English are fleeing, boarding ships without warning. I'm counting on you.*

—*Understood, my commander. I'll transfer command of my company to Chief Warrant Officer Dupont and...*

—*Don't worry about that, the commander cut in abruptly. I'll handle it myself as soon as you leave.*

—*But ...*

—*Go ! What the hell, Hautberg! I told you it's urgent !*



Pedaling down a sunken path, Hautberg tried to shake the obsession that now haunted him. The combat zone loomed ever closer. On the distant horizon, one could almost see the panzers rolling westward, their iron bellies growling. Their tracks moaned and shrieked, explosions rhythmically marking their advance. The English had abandoned artillery and tanks, fleeing to the beaches.

"How could such absurd orders be issued? Clearly, this officer owed his rank to connections, not competence. Favoritism. Cronyism. A cancer rotting the army from within. Incompetence, when it wears the uniform of command, becomes criminal. He could be killed in some forest thicket—and if the commander were killed before passing along the details of his mission, who would know what became of Lieutenant Hautberg ? One more missing soldier. One more widow. Two more orphans."

Then, a thought —more lethal than any bullet— struck him. His legs froze. The bicycle shuddered to a halt against a rock. He stood motionless, staring at a hedge ahead.

Of course ! How had he not realized it sooner ?

It was all calculated."

The commander wanted him dead. This mission was a trap, a silent execution to punish his defiance earlier that morning; a clean disappearance —no witnesses, no paper trail, no handover of command. Later, Gabrielli could simply declare him missing... or worse, a deserter... a coward... a traitor. The stain on his honor would be eternal. Gabrielli's vengeance would be complete.

The commander was more cunning than King David, who had sent Uriah to die for the sake of his wife. At least David had the excuse of passion. This was just petty revenge for being made to look a fool.

Blazing with rage, Hautberg turned, ready to storm back and denounce the plot. But how could he prove it ? It was all speculation —real, sharp as razors in his mind— but still, just intuition. Gabrielli would deny everything. He could court-martial him for insubordination, or even shoot him on the spot. Military justice was rarely just.

After several minutes of internal struggle, Hautberg forced his fury down. He would complete the mission. Let his actions speak louder than vengeance.

Ten minutes later, he reached the edge of a plateau. The battle had passed. Burnt-out British vehicles smoldered. Silence, save for distant shelling, hung over the landscape.

Near the crest, a farm.

He ditched his bicycle in a bush and crept forward, darting from cover to cover in a zigzag. An enemy sniper might be watching.

The farmhouse lay in the center of the area he was to observe. It had to be checked.

He approached the door of the main building, heart pounding. All was still. No movement. No sound but the soft hum of war in the distance. A bell chimed faintly from a nearby church, an eerie echo of peace.

He turned the doorknob.

Inside, silence. A long table, set for a meal : twenty white earthenware bowls. Abandoned helmets and maps littered the room. A Scottish kilt lay crumpled beneath the table.

The explosion had come through the south window — shards of glass everywhere. The HQ had been hit. The British had fled or surrendered. Tank tracks circled the courtyard outside.

The mission, he realized bitterly, had been pointless.



Half an hour later, Lieutenant Hautberg raced back into the village, legs aching from pedaling. Something felt wrong. It was deserted. His battalion had vanished, without a trace — down to the last jeep.

Panic rising, he rode hard toward the southern outskirts. There ! The tail end of a convoy. His company. He shouted hoarsely, his lungs burning, and pushed harder to catch them.

A wartime engineer battalion comprised four companies of 300 sappers and pioneers each, not including the Command and Services Company. Orders had to trickle down through the ranks. Bivouacs, tents, field kitchens — all had to be struck and packed. Horses harnessed. Carriages loaded. It took a good two hours to get moving.

And they'd left without him.

Without even waiting for his report.

It became all too clear: Commander Gabrielli had ordered the camp's immediate departure the moment Lieutenant Hautberg had left on his doomed mission. The realization deepened the uneasy feeling that had been gnawing at him. As a soldier, he was accustomed to brushing against death daily — but he had never imagined it could come from *within* his own ranks, from someone meant to share in the fight against their common enemy: the Nazi German invader.

Unable to catch up with the battalion commander, who was traveling by motor vehicle, Lieutenant Hautberg resumed command of his company, which trailed just behind the withdrawing column.



Two days later, Hautberg and his men struggled forward, inch by inch, behind the battalion, weaving through a river of Dutch refugees. He seethed at the memory of Gabrielli's astonishment upon seeing him return alive — that feigned surprise which failed to hide his discomfort. Marius had wanted to ask why no one had been assigned to replace him, why no change of command had been announced. But he bit his tongue, choosing not to stoke a fire already threatening to rage.

The commander hadn't even bothered to inquire about the outcome of the so-called "*mission of confidence*."

The kilometers dragged by, agonizingly slow, through a mass of weary European civilians.<sup>1</sup> Every so often, a German or Italian fighter plane screamed overhead, strafing the crowd, scattering it in all directions — as sheep flee from a lunging wolf or a *Mastino Napoletano*. The aircraft descended with demonic roars, their bullets sowing death, before darting back into the pale sky, hounded by futile rifle shots and shouted curses.

Now and then, one of the attackers was hit and burst into flames beyond the soft, green hills. A chorus of jeers followed.

—That one won't piss us off anymore...

The bridges were chokepoints, each crossing a slow ordeal. Elderly refugees collapsed where they stood. Hautberg managed to get his men across the Oise River moments before *Stukas* and *Breda* bombers obliterated the historic bridge. Thanks to quick thinking and a few side roads, he had gotten his company to safety.

By the roadside, Hautberg came across a riderless horse. Without hesitation, he commandeered it, allowing him to scout ahead of the column through the fields. But no sooner had he mounted than a dusty Peugeot 202 crept up through the chaos. The

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<sup>1</sup> French, Belgian, Dutch, Luxembourgers, Jewish...



rear window rolled down — and Gabrielli's red, bloated face emerged, inflamed with fury. Beside that face, the dark muzzle of a **PA35** pistol stared at him like a cyclopean eye.

—*Hautberg ! Gabrielli bellowed.*

—*Yes, my commander ?*

—*Get off that horse immediately, or I'll blow your brains out !*

Stunned, the lieutenant met the commander's gaze — eyes narrowed by hate and alcohol — and instantly grasped the situation. Gabrielli had seized upon the confusion of retreat to settle a score. There had been no insubordination, no offense, only a deep-seated resentment toward a subordinate who had humiliated him with competence and honor. Hautberg knew: any hesitation would be an excuse to kill him.

He dismounted at once and stood frozen, upright and unarmed, just two meters from the barrel. Gabrielli read the fear in his eyes — and it thrilled him. At last, the moment had come. Revenge. The joy of holding in one's grasp the life of someone despised. Gabrielli felt godlike — like a cruel deity of antiquity, ready to snip the thread of life with a sneer.

He could see the lieutenant's brown eyes fixed not on his face, but on the finger tightening around the trigger. "*Ah, you little bastard, he thought, now it's your turn to piss adrenaline... and soon, blood. I'll make you die for your country — my way.*"

All around them, the column shuffled forward, oblivious. Civilians, soldiers, horses — all half-dead from exhaustion and despair. No one noticed the deadly confrontation between the two officers. Nor did they see the dying strewn along the roadside, casualties of the last airstrike, gasping out their final breaths in the indifferent grass.

Gabrielli's finger twitched. The trigger gave slightly. Hautberg braced himself for the violent impact that would tear through his chest. The wait was unbearable. Death was no longer terrifying — the anticipation was.

Then, a sudden *click* — not from the pistol, but behind Gabrielli's head.

The commander turned and froze. Inches from his temple, the black muzzle of a carbine glared back at him. Behind the rifle, a sapper from Hautberg's company — his orderly — stared down the sights with unwavering resolve.

The officer's finger relaxed, the pistol retreating behind the car window like a beast tucking away its fangs.

—*Lieutenant*, whispered the sapper, *am I authorized to shoot ?*

—*No*, Hautberg replied quietly. His voice bore the calm gravity of Victor Hugo's father offering water to a wounded Spaniard who had tried to kill him. *Let him go*.

Gabrielli, his thirst for revenge suddenly sobered by the prospect of immediate death, snapped at the driver.

—Drive !

The Peugeot slipped back into the human tide and vanished into the chaos of the debacle.

In May 1940, Marius was granted leave to mark the birth of his daughter, Marie-France.



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**The letters.**

On a sweltering morning just after Canada Day, July 1<sup>st</sup>, the mailman dropped a crimson envelope into the mailbox of Joëlle Verten — a young girl whom capricious Nature had greatly gifted intellectually, though regrettably, she had also allowed an unfortunate corpulence to overshadow her physical appeal.

Joëlle delicately opened the scarlet envelope and read:

Surrey, July 3<sup>rd</sup>

*Dear Joëlle,*

*You'll no doubt be surprised —perhaps even shocked— to receive this letter from a boy in your class at École Gabrielle-Roy who, until now, has shown you nothing but apparent indifference.*

Without delay, Joëlle turned the sheet to see who on earth could have written her in such a tone. Her eyes fell on the signature: *Jacques Vinerbi, 4823 Montcalm Street, Vancouver.* The name awakened a distant memory — the image of a silent, introspective boy emerged slowly, like a figure rising through fog.

*After much hesitation, I took the liberty of writing to you. In life, sometimes we must push past our limits to seize an opportunity that may never come again.*

Joëlle's heart pounded in her overly generous chest. No boy had ever made the slightest advance. Her eyes devoured the rest of the letter.

*Laura's aura*

*I couldn't help but admire your brilliant mind and sharp wit. You rarely spoke, but when you did, your words always aligned with thoughts I hadn't yet dared to express. You can imagine, then, how much I've admired you — despite your clear indifference toward me.*

Joëlle was breathless. Her heart overflowed with joy. A beam of memory now lit up the once-hazy silhouette of Jacques Vinerbi — solitary as a great horned owl, always perched at the back of the classroom. Tall, dark-haired, quiet... it could only have been him. No doubt about it. She recalled every boy in their class of forty, and the evidence was irrefutable.

*When I returned home for the holidays, I was swept by an unexpected melancholy. Not because I dislike holidays, of course, but because of a feeling I couldn't quite place. So I searched myself and eventually uncovered the truth: I miss you.*

*It's hard for someone like me —shy, withdrawn— to confess these feelings. But I'd rather take the risk of speaking my heart than regret forever having stayed silent. As the saying goes : "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."*

*Would you agree to exchange letters with me? It doesn't commit you to anything. But just imagining that your feelings might mirror mine fills me with unspeakable joy.*

*With all my heart, dear Joëlle, I hope you will respond.  
Yours sincerely,*

*Jacques*



*Laura's aura*

A few days later, Jacques Vinerbi received the following reply :

Langley, July 10<sup>th</sup>

*Dear Jacques,*

I must have read your wonderful letter a hundred times already. I can't thank you enough for the happiness it has brought me.

Far from resenting your previous silence, I admire your restraint. In uncertain situations, caution is a virtue. Your discretion, your seriousness — these are qualities I hold in the highest regard.

I even shared your letter with my parents. Since this may be my final year at school, they are not opposed to us expressing our feelings.

You have no idea how happy your words have made me. I find myself longing for school to resume — so I can discover for myself what our hearts may already know.

Forgive me if I seemed distant. The truth is, I didn't know how to show my interest. I fear I may have hurt you with my apparent indifference. Please forgive me.

If you don't mind, I'd love to keep writing to you this summer. Nothing would make me happier than to correspond with the man I now consider my *Prince Charming*.

*Affectionately,*

*Joëlle*



"*What sort of sick joke is this ?*" thought Jacques Vinerbi, staring at the letter — since, of course, *he* had never written the first one.

So, Joëlle had taken the liberty of replying to a love letter he never sent ? Or... perhaps it was a cruel prank, orchestrated by some mischievous university peer. Yes — that was it. A joke. Perhaps Solange, the strikingly beautiful girl whose advances he had shyly deflected ? Or Marius, green with envy at her flirtatious glances ?

Whatever the cause — jealousy or mockery — it was a mean trick. And cruel.

Still confused but intrigued, Jacques took up a pen and a sheet of stationery:



Langley, July 16<sup>th</sup>

*Dear Joëlle,*

Your letter was a painful revelation of just how malicious people can be. The letter you received — the one that prompted your kind reply — was not from me. It was the work of a fool with a nasty sense of humor. Some people find perverse joy in humiliating others for obscure reasons. And the more upset we become, the greater their delight.

So, in the spirit of denying them that satisfaction, I propose we turn this ridiculous prank into something meaningful. Why not

*Laura's aura*

allow this strange twist of fate to bring us closer ? Perhaps we could get to know each other for real. What do you think ?

In the meantime, I hope you're enjoying your summer — despite this odd start.

*Warm regards,  
Jacques*



Surrey, July 22<sup>nd</sup>

Dear Jacques,

I wholeheartedly share your view on this little farce — an ordeal, no doubt, concocted by a coterie of small-minded fools. Ironically, the very stunt intended to ridicule us has only brought us closer, at least in appearance. Our new familiarity, calling each other by our first names, will convince them that they inadvertently sparked a charming turn in our lives. A delicious twist ! When in fact, all they wished was to throw us off balance.

Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if Marius Tremblay had a hand in this juvenile conspiracy. He and his charming Solange have always exuded a toxic kind of cheer. As for Solange, I suspect jealousy as her true motive. Don't scoff — I'm convinced she harbors a secret fondness for you.

Yes, Jacques, I assure you ! I've often noticed the way she observed you in class—furtive glances, feigned indifference, ears pricked for your every word. She never dared declare her admira-

*Laura's aura*

tion, of course —not while tied to that walking pomposity, Marius— but her comments always seemed like fragments of a deeper truth. I watched them closely, still and silent, like an owl in the rafters. Nothing escaped me.

You see, Jacques, I had no difficulty taking that first step toward you. The first step is always the hardest... but oh, how pleasant the result.

Sincerely,

Your friend, *Joëlle*



Langley, July 29<sup>th</sup>

Dear Joëlle,

Your comments about Solange leave me torn between amusement and disbelief. Still, even if this malicious prank has led to something fortuitous, I believe we owe it to ourselves to deliver a proper response — and, as they say, give them their money's worth.

I propose we uncover the truth — pinpoint the exact architect of this cruel joke. My instincts point to Marius. And if I can't call it certainty yet, I call it deep conviction. Since you're close to Géraldine, could you sound her out discreetly ? She could, in turn, nudge Cyprien — everyone knows he competes with Marius for



*Laura's aura*

Solange's dubious affections. If anyone is in the loop, it's him. And if not, he'll surely enjoy stirring the pot to get the scoop.

Once I have the name —proof, not just suspicion— I will ensure the perpetrator is... appropriately educated.

In the meantime, Joëlle, I send you my warmest regards and wait eagerly for news.

Yours, Jacques



Surrey, August 1<sup>st</sup>

Dear Jacques,

I write to you with great satisfaction: we have our culprit. It is, as suspected, the ever-odious Marius. While we always assumed as much, it's satisfying to have confirmation before we embark on the... consequences we're now relishing in advance. The prospect of the pain he will feel is a sweet consolation indeed.

Of course, I know what the sages say : forgiveness is the path of the wise, and vengeance often turns on the avenger. But forgiveness teaches the guilty nothing. Marius would walk away smug and untouchable. No, I will join you, wholeheartedly, in setting the scales right. Let me know what you have in mind — I'd like to sprinkle a bit of salt on the wound myself.

*Laura's aura*

As for me, my parents are adamant I pursue medicine at McGill, claiming it is unmatched. What do you think ?

I leave you with these heavy thoughts, and a kiss of comfort. The next one will be from Montreal.

Your friend, **Joëlle**



Langley, August 28<sup>th</sup>

Dearest Joëlle,

Allow me to unveil the grand machinery of our revenge, which I've now put into motion with meticulous care and, I dare say, artistic flair.

First, I procured a prepaid cellphone in Marius's name. Then, using this identity, I booked the most outrageously expensive suite I could find : the *Royal Suite* at the *Rosewood Hotel Georgia*. A single night : \$8,500. Yes, my dear Joëlle, eight thousand, five hundred dollars — to sleep a few hours in someone else's bed and convince oneself of one's own magnificence.

And that's not all. I've arranged a reception for thirty guests—dinner, dancing, and three live musicians. Price tag? \$4,500. Total damage: \$16,850.87, taxes included. A small discount was granted, thanks to my pretend groomliness. I had to put down a \$1,000 deposit, which I consider a modest fee for poetic justice.

*Laura's aura*

The bait is set. Come September 18th, Marius will receive the invoice—and if he refuses to pay, the legal machinery will take over. A cozy cell awaits him... perhaps near mine someday!

With deep affection, and best wishes for your new life in Montreal,  
Your co-conspirator and friend, *Jacques*



Montreal, September 20<sup>th</sup>

Dear Jacques,

Forgive my delay. The excitement of your last letter had me pacing the floor with anticipation. So? Tell me everything! Did the trap spring? Did Marius fall face-first into your elaborate web ?

Your boldness, your taste for daring — how admirable. You are, I confess, the kind of man who stirs my imagination. And yet, your fierce virility worries me a little. Life has a perverse sense of humor, Jacques. Sometimes, it punishes the righteous and rewards the vile.

Take care, my conquistador. I kiss you tenderly.

*Joëlle*, who thinks of you daily



Abbotsford, October 21<sup>st</sup>

Dear Joëlle,

Ah, your letter! A delight. If only you knew how your words warmed this cold cell. You asked how our little *Operation Retribution* concluded—alas, not quite as planned.

The suite remained empty, the feast uneaten, the music unheard. Marius, that imbecile, never showed. And yet—he never paid either. A narrow escape. Still, I take solace in a Confucian truth: *He who seeks revenge should dig two graves—one for his enemy, one for himself.* Indeed, wisdom often arrives late.

Until we meet again, dear Joëlle, I send a heartfelt embrace.

*Jacques*

**P.S.** By the way, if you ever feel the urge to bring me a few “blood oranges” (you know how I adore them—perhaps it’s the crime fiction reader in me), you can find me here for the next few years:

Mr. Jacques Vinerbi

Matsqui Federal Penitentiary West Wing, Cell 435

Abbotsford, BC V3S 4P3

Sorry I forgot to mention it sooner.



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**High Fidelity.**

We humans have an uncanny talent for assigning our triumphs to our own brilliance, and our setbacks to the malice of others or the cruelty of fate. It's the only way to avoid feeling humiliated.

As for me, I'm a happy man — and I freely admit I owe much of my happiness to sheer luck. The *goddess Chance*, whom the Greeks named *Tyche*, has smiled on me more often than I deserve. On one memorable occasion, she even shielded me from a faux pas so dangerous, so delicious, that it might have rewritten the entire script of my life.

In 1935, I married the love of my life, Marianne. At that time, Hitler had begun to unleash his demonic tirades in Europe, though few suspected the depths of horror that would emerge from his fevered mind.

No one imagined how deeply we too would become entangled in the battle to destroy the monstrous empire he was dreaming into being.

And yet, far from the thundering hooves of history, I was entranced by a personal drama of much smaller scale — but, to me, far greater consequence.

I had been courting Marianne for over a year, utterly in love, convinced she was the most extraordinary woman west of the Rockies. To suggest otherwise would have left me speechless. But love, as anyone who has truly lost themselves in it knows, has the unsettling power to transfigure, to blind us utterly to reason.

Jean Ferrat knew this well when he yearned for the “*singing tomorrows*” of a world remade by passion and poetry.



On May 28<sup>th</sup>, 1935, the urgency to marry Marianne suddenly became acute. Don't imagine, as the great Enrico Macias might say, that we were pushed forward by questions of *family honor*. No — something far more banal and dangerous was at play. Marianne's younger sister, Chéhérazade, had arrived from Quebec for the wedding. She was, quite simply, ravishing.

And when I say "*ravishing*," I mean it in the fullest, most spellbinding sense. Her beauty hit me like a thunderclap. I could hardly look at her without blushing. Her name alone — borrowed from the fabled teller of a thousand tales — was enough to stir dreams of adventure and forbidden love.

I was in trouble.

The Italian *Giovanni Florio* —whom the English rather boldly repackaged as *William Shakespeare*— warned us not to say "*later*" in matters of love. "*The future is made of chances*," he said, "*so we must pluck today what tomorrow will wither.*"

And though Marianne was my heart's anchor, I feared I might not withstand even the faintest gust from her sister's siren charms.

From dawn to dusk, I thought only of my bride-to-be. But from dusk to dawn, my mind betrayed me. All I could see was Chéhérazade.



Molière once said the grand ambition of women is to inspire love. If that was her aim, Chéhérazade succeeded with devastating grace. Without so much as a word, she lit a fire in my chest and left me pacing the floors of my conscience like a prisoner.

## *Laura's aura*

She had twenty-three youthful springs behind her, and her every movement stirred chaos in my fragile, romantic heart.

Her long chestnut hair fell in soft waves over her ivory skin. Her lips —red as Keresoum cherries— seemed sculpted by Aphrodite herself. Each time she embraced me in farewell, my cheeks brushed her skin and I was undone. I thought of Luis Mariano's fevered boleros :

*"The first night we walk,  
We dance a tender bolero.  
The second, we go wild—  
And under the sky of Mexico,  
We forget everything..."*

Ah ! He understood women so well.

One day, as I lay dozing in the shade of a peach tree, she approached. But instead of greeting her, I feigned sleep and secretly watched. She slowly unbuttoned her blouse, revealing the full glory of her neckline. I was stunned — transfixed. Had she no shame ? Was she trying to seduce me ? How could she betray her sister ?

And yet... I could not stop watching.

Her back arched with feline grace, her hips swayed gently beneath a tantalizing orange-apricot bikini, and the dimples of Venus peeked above her hips like mischievous punctuation. My thoughts wandered —no, sprinted— into forbidden territories.

I recalled what I'd learned at Cambridge during a rather curious course in *rumpology* — a British pseudoscience that examined the creases and curves of one's posterior for signs of fate. I had even toyed with the idea of becoming a professional, joining the *Royal British Rumpology Association*. A respectable occupation, apparently, for those in search of unusual careers... or fulfillment.

## *Laura's aura*

When she caught my eye, I saw a flicker —was it shame ?  
Or just coquettish calculation? She covered herself half-heartedly.  
—*Oh my...! I thought you were sleeping !* she said, feigning surprise.

—*I was, I lied.*



During the two weeks of wedding preparations, I endured three distinct attacks on my self-control. Each time, I was alone at Marianne's house, waiting for her to return from work. And each time, the seductive assault of Chéhérazade intensified.

Was it jealousy that drove her? A need to prove that no man could resist her ? Whatever it was, she seemed enslaved by some compulsion —perhaps Freud would have seen childhood neuroses— but I saw only torment. I loved Marianne deeply. If I succumbed, I would lose her forever for a fleeting, though no doubt heavenly, moment of forbidden ecstasy.

But she kept tempting me, day after day. At night, my dreams were filled with Chéhérazades, as persistent and perilous as the courtesans who once tried to tempt *Saint Benedict*.<sup>1</sup>

By day, I clung to virtue ; by night, I nearly abandoned it. My willpower —how I cursed it!— was my only salvation.



Then came the penultimate day.

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<sup>1</sup> With his face to the ground, the monk St.Benedict frantically embraced the cross to escape the temptation of the flesh. Tradition has it that his family would send him temptresses (in the simplest garb) to break his vow of chastity...



## *Laura's aura*

She gestured for me to follow. I hesitated, then obeyed. Up the stairs she floated, her hips hypnotic. When she reached her room, she let me enter... then closed the door.

—*Narcisse*, she whispered, opening her arms, *tomorrow you marry for eternity. Today is our last day.*

I froze, a statue of indecision, like Saint Anne petrified in her shell.

—*Come, Narcisse. If you're ready for this adventure, let us surrender our flesh to the ultimate love.*

Her words were velvet, her body a temple of temptation. I stood there, stunned, when a faint voice inside me cried out :

—*Narcisse, stop ! You're a traitor! You're about to destroy everything !*

But another, louder voice countered :

—Don't be an idiot ! This is your last chance !

My body moved on its own. Then —miraculously !— my brain sputtered back to life and barked :

“*At least, go get a condom from the car, Narcisse !*”

I bolted down the stairs, out the door — and straight into my fate.



There they were —Marianne and her parents— clapping, laughing, waiting for me with open arms. My beloved flung herself at me, showering me with kisses, and I heard her father declare :

—*Narcisse, you've passed your entrance exam with flying colors ! Welcome to the family. We'll always trust you !*

## *Laura's aura*

Marianne held me tight. Her kiss stopped the truth before it reached my lips, her deep kiss caught the lie that was about to come out of my lips.

And that, dear reader, is how the goddess Tyche saved me, one last time.

"Aunt Jacqueline was gorgeous, beautiful as a summer day; so beautiful that Uncle Eugene married her after 40 days, for it had not taken him 40 minutes to love her like crazy and ask for her hand."



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**Aunt Jacqueline**

They were four dusty old souls, worn down by the long, slow grind of life. Almost every day, weather permitting and the tide low enough to reveal a few hectares of basaltic sand, they met on the beach at White Rock —three men and a woman— perched side by side on a weathered drift log. One of those logs that had escaped from the great log rafts adrift at sea, only to be gently tossed ashore by the Strait of Juan de Fuca, like a vacationer returning home.

They seemed as frail as sparrows clinging to a wire in the chill of spring. All four had lived in the seaside village since its founding at the dawn of the twentieth century, back when the land —now worth more than gold<sup>1</sup>— was given away as a bonus to Vancouverites who subscribed to *BC Magazine*. These patriarchs liked to revisit old memories, as old people often do, uneasy with the world's new direction. But memory, like a mischievous child, plays tricks. It peers out, says "Remember me?"—then vanishes again into the fog of forgetfulness. Sometimes, though, a detail or an anecdote would bob to the surface, like a fish skimming the lake, and the old man who caught it would pin it down, as a lepidopterist does a butterfly.



One bright July afternoon, shortly after *Canada Day*, one of them called for silence. He wanted to recount a story, passed down from his grandmother, about an ancestor named Jacqueline.

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty times more than the building itself. This magazine is still around.

## *Laura's aura*

“This is my Aunt Jacqueline’s tale, he began. She was beautiful — radiant as a summer morning. So beautiful, in fact, that my Uncle Eugene proposed forty minutes after meeting her and married her forty days later. Hormones ablaze, he even had her voluptuous figure tattooed across his chest, sprawled proudly over his pectorals.”

He paused and smiled grimly. “*He spent the next forty years regretting it.*”

Jacqueline was the kind of woman whose beauty made gallants lose their bearings. One admirer once claimed that 95% of men would forsake their marital vows just for a fleeting hour in her arms. She began to believe it herself, growing drunk on every glance that lingered too long on her. But her mother, hardened by peasant wisdom, saw beauty not as a gift, but as a wasting asset — a sandcastle too close to the tide. She urged her daughter not to squander it on charm or sentiment, but to barter it for security. “Better to cast your virtue with a man of substance,” she warned, “than waste it on a penniless flirt. You might as well toss it to the nettles, like so many other pretty fools.”

Times change. What was once Virtue is now a punchline.



“*The story, the old man said, goes back to 1865. I can’t vouch for every detail. As Gilles Vigneault once said, I exaggerate a little so you can see it from afar.*”

Eugene, her unfortunate husband, was the second son of a miller in New Westminster, back when the area was still called *New Caledonia*. His elder brother inherited the mill, so Eugene went into insurance — an occupation that kept him ever on the road, winding through hills and valleys shaped by the Pacific Plate’s restless pressure.

Meanwhile, Jacqueline languished at home, alone and idle. In those days, a wife working outside the home was an embarrassment to her husband. Her boredom fermented into regret. She had given this man her greatest treasures —her beauty and her virtue— and received in return long absences and cold silences. She envied the young girls still smelling the roses of life. Her cousin once wrote her a poem, urging her not to waste her springtime bouquet. The patriarch paused again and quoted, solemn and proud:

To You, Jacqueline – ***The Leap of Life***  
*He walked slowly, entangled in his skis,  
In a hurry to finally reach the slope and escape.  
He noticed nothing, nor the exquisite valleys,  
Nor the sky, dotted with sweet illusions.  
In his back lay the invisible procession  
Whose dotted steps, smaller and smaller,  
Were lost forever in the snowy horizon  
With an uncertain, grayish and indecisive outline.  
Arrived at the top of the steep track,  
Eager to run, he locked his boards,  
And beat violently with his sharp sticks,  
The hard ground that pitched his white rump under him.  
The increasing speed exhilarated him with pleasure;  
A wind of freedom stung his cheeks cold.  
He could finally live, fulfill his desires,  
Enjoy his happiness and please his tastes.  
He laughed in the wind, voluptuously,  
When he lives at the very bottom of the cursed track,  
A fatal dark chasm that opened wide  
His terrible jaw with a granite rictus.  
As soon as he sobered up, the man wanted to stop;  
But its speed grew instead of slowing down.  
Irresistibly, the slope dragged him  
Towards the abyss where death would annihilate him.*

## *Laura's aura*

*Eyes fixed with terror on the gaping abyss,  
The man realized he had to die.  
Dizzily, towards his ultimate Destiny  
He glided without hope, without a buoy to grasp.  
Then the cold dug wrinkles in his skin.  
And frost and fear whiten his hair.  
The effort hunched his back as if under a burden  
And his hand shuddered with a nervous tremor.  
The slope, so long seen from above, had fled  
Immediately like a dream. He lives again in a dream  
His endless youth, all those days and nights,  
Then the exhilarating but brief maturity.  
But death was waiting, its mouth wide open.  
He straightened his forehead to die with dignity.  
And stared at his executioner, whose inert figure  
With a cry of horror, ended his torment.*

Jacqueline had smiled politely, flattered but uncomprehending. Symbolism was not her strength.

She reached fifty without noticing. One morning, she looked in the mirror and realized she had begun her descent. Time turned against her, and she, who had once been obsessed with appearances, began lying about her age — first by months, then years. But even if she fooled others, she couldn't deceive herself. She sought solace in food, then in drink.

A friend, a Burgundy wine importer, swore that red wine cured obesity. She believed him. We always believe those who flatter our weaknesses. After all, isn't it easier to dig your grave with a fork than with a shovel ?

Jacqueline lived on — sixty long winters. She aged into a grotesque parody of her youthful self. Her final humiliation came when even the crematorium could not accommodate her. A carpenter was commissioned to build her an oversized white box, crude

## *Laura's aura*

and coffin-like, in which to ferry her to the misty roads of eternity.

A local historian tried to comfort the family, recalling Queen Anne of England's own ungainly funeral crate. But as they say, it's not the carriage that matters — it's the journey.



Ten years later, Eugene passed away. The once-proud tattoo on his chest had wrinkled and sagged like his skin. In his will — clouded by dementia not yet called Alzheimer's — he requested to be buried with Jacqueline, the woman he remembered only as the dazzling girl from their first weeks of marriage. The gravedigger came, along with the parish priest and a few family witnesses. They opened Jacqueline's coffin to verify the remains.

No one expected what they saw.

Her corpse hadn't decomposed. Her mouth was wide open in a silent scream. Her arms were raised, clawing at the lid. The inside of the white coffin bore deep, desperate scratch marks.

She had been buried alive — perhaps cataleptic, like so many mistaken for dead in that era.



"That's how my Aunt Jacqueline died, the old man concluded."

The others sat in stunned silence, shivering in the sun, each suddenly considering whether it might not be wise to be buried with a cell phone — just in case.



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**The clown.**

Everyone saw Lucien as a tireless prankster, an adorable jester, a clown never quite satisfied until he had an audience laughing. He could talk for hours about the tricks he'd played, as if laughter were no longer a choice but a vital necessity.

Making people laugh — that was how he felt truly alive. This compulsive urge to joke gripped him with the strength of an addiction. If he went more than a few hours without a prank, a vague discomfort would seize him — like a junkie deprived of his fix.

Boredom soon gave way to despondency, and then to a heavy, suffocating dread. He only had to feel the emptiness welling inside him to see the grinning mask of depression rise in the mirror.

Lucien, tormented by his need to "buffoon," consulted more than one doctor of body and mind. They explained that his antics triggered a surge of endorphins — those opiate-like chemicals produced by the brain to dull pain and induce pleasure.

This gave him an illusion of euphoria, a fleeting fullness, a false sense of well-being. But behind the comic façade, Lucien lived under threat of a dark collapse. He feared becoming that sad clown who, in the end, made his loved ones cry. One therapist suggested he regularly stimulate his hypothalamus and pituitary gland through exercise — the source of these elusive "happiness hormones."

So Lucien jogged, swam, and stretched. But just as crucial as sport was his daily ritual of dreaming up jokes and pranks, which he eagerly played on those around him. He called them *his survival*



## *Laura's aura*

drugs, his *organic antidepressants*. Because his jokes were never cruel, only mischievous, they earned him affection —sometimes even tenderness— from those in his orbit.

Yet, at nineteen, he had a strange dream. A tramp approached him, asking for spare change. Lucien, who believed everyone should earn their keep, refused. But the vagabond replied :

—*Do you want to know who I am ?*

—*Yes... of course ! Who are you ?*

—*I am someone you know very well... I'm you, in old age.*

The words blew a gust of panic through his chest. He handed the man a toonie.



At twenty, Lucien was a student at *Simon Fraser University's* Surrey campus, a glass spire gleaming in the suburban haze near the US border. He lived modestly on *Avenue 0*, a little-known road that paralleled the border, where the frontier was marked by nothing more than a fifty-centimeter wide ditch.

Nothing like the steel wall now towering along the Rio Grande to keep out the “*huddled masses*” that Lady Liberty once welcomed with open arms — a Lady who, ironically, was born in the land of *Human Rights*.

It was at SFU, between two lectures, that Lucien met Gertrude, a Swiss-Italian student his age. She had the softness and radiance of youth, but one could already sense the cruel weight of future flesh eyeing her body like a jealous predator, determined to deny her the happiness of being light and lithe.

Lucien and Gertrude grew close, much to the surprise of their classmates. The class clown, usually so daring, became bashful in her presence. Her parents reassured her — this, they said,

was often the case with the most extroverted : before one person, they melted into shyness, especially if that person mattered.

The idea comforted Gertrude, whose self-consciousness was a constant whisper in her mind. Like Groucho Marx, she sometimes wondered if any boy smitten with her couldn't possibly be worth loving.

Cautious and meticulous, Gertrude began joining Lucien for Sunday hikes. Their first outing was to Granville Island. They shared a baguette and French charcuterie on the waterfront. Then came the glowing dome of Science World and its experiments. Another Sunday, Gertrude crossed the Capilano Suspension Bridge, trembling like a leaf.

At the Museum of Anthropology, she discovered that the Amerindians had practiced slavery long before Europeans arrived. She marveled at the sad constancy of privilege : throughout time, the rich have always found ways to get the poor to do their work — cheaply or not at all.

They wandered Stanley Park's seawall, browsed exhibitions of satirical art, and stood in awe before jellyfish at the aquarium.

Sometimes Lucien would hold her hand as they walked, wind in their faces, like Queen Victoria and her beloved Abdul. Her feelings bloomed slowly, like wildflowers, though doubts persisted. Could she truly be loved ?

One afternoon, Lucien kissed her on the lips — not a cinematic kiss, not a devouring one, but a soft, airy peck. Tender. Gallant.

A month later, he said:

*—Gertrude, I'd like to invite you over. I've prepared a small, intimate dinner. With Champagne.*

She agreed. She'd thought about this moment for a long time. She trusted him completely. Still a virgin at eighteen, she sometimes felt like an antique, obsolete in a world that mocked virtue. Her classmates, more liberal with their bodies, had ridiculed the "*prudish*," while secretly envying their dignity, as Dostoevsky might have put it.



Friday the 28<sup>th</sup>. Lucien picked her up. She trembled with excitement — and fear. But oh, how happy she was ! He, too, was flustered. During the dinner, he spilled the sauce, then the lemonade, then the coffee. The meal was rich, almost too rich — Gertrude broke into a cold sweat over its impact on her waistline.

He had set the table beautifully : fine Limoges plates, red candles flickering in a silver candelabra from a thrift store. She watched the flames dance in his shy eyes. For once, he didn't joke. They were both too moved — too nervous.

She had studied for this first Night. Read books. Clicked through websites, until disgust had overwhelmed her. She had to be perfect.

Lucien, equally anxious, plated the mashed potatoes and minced steak. He had once caught a rash from a past girlfriend — fever, itching, migraines. Since then, he'd almost taken a vow of chastity. Tonight, could be beautiful. Or a catastrophe. He always did have a knack for complications.

Dessert was apple pie. He kissed her forehead, led her gently to his bedroom.

*—Undress in the dark, he whispered. I'll join you in a moment.*

She was comforted by the darkness. Her body's small imperfections haunted her. She lay trembling under the sheet.

*Laura's aura*

Then came the sound of the door. His voice, soft:

—*Are you ready ?*

—*Yes, she replied in a whisper.*

She heard rustling, a step. Then :

—*I'm taking off the sheet...*

—*Okay...*

The cool air caressed her skin. And then — A blinding light. Laughter. Dozens of faces. Flashing cameras.

Her classmates. A nightmare. The ultimate betrayal.



A month later, Lucien lay on a prison cot when the overhead light snapped on. The metallic clack of the peephole followed. The guard's voice :

—*You okay, Lucien?*

—*Yes. Well... I've been better.*

—*You'll see. Six years go fast. With good behavior, maybe four. Hang in there.*

—*Thanks... sir.*

It was his final “joke.” He never recovered. Branded, brutalized, raped, broken in prison. Marked forever by shame and trauma, he drifted into the woods and fields. That may sound bucolic —picnics and fresh air— but believe me, it wasn't. He died alone in a ditch, half-eaten by rats and scavengers.

Until the end, he remembered the tramp who'd said : “*I'm you, when you're old.*”

Maybe the tramp said that to everyone — just to provoke kindness.

### *Laura's aura*

As for Gertrude, she never allowed herself to love again.  
But she had two children. By artificial insemination.



**The clown**

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**The farewell party**

Classrooms are microcosms of society —complete with leaders and outcasts, the privileged and the marginalized, the exploiters and the exploited. Evangeline had drawn the short straw in life. At just fourteen, she had already endured more than many do in a lifetime.

On her fifth birthday, she learned that her parents —those she had once believed to be forever bound— were separating. The constant quarreling, the background noise of domestic strife, was nothing new to her.

Louise, her mother, felt stifled by her role as a housewife. She believed, not without reason, that her intelligence was being squandered behind the walls of her home. Gerald, her father, complained incessantly — about work, about incompetent subordinates, and superiors who misused authority.

One day, an *avant-garde* psychologist —original in his theories, if not in his wisdom— suggested a *role reversal*, for the good of the family. Louise would re-enter the workforce, and Gerald would become a homemaker.

Surprisingly, the experiment was a success —at least initially. Gerald took up cleaning, mending, and, with the help of several cookbooks, began cultivating some culinary flair. Evenings saw him helping with homework and chatting about soap operas, while Louise returned home with tales from her office life.

Their friends were amused. Louise's mother nicknamed Gerald "*the emperor of the home*," which the man accepted with a

laugh, embracing his role with care and attention. For a brief time, the house held peace.

But summer arrived, with its long, golden afternoons, and Gerald began spending more time mowing the lawn, sunbathing, or watching TV. He brought Evangeline to piano lessons and even to the beach.

Meanwhile, Louise —now returning home exhausted — found herself growing bitter. Snide remarks from her friends about her “*kept husband*” or “*gigolo*” began to sting. At first, she shrugged them off. But over time, their venom seeped into her heart. She felt used once again, by life and by love.

Their marriage crumbled. And on Evangeline’s fifth birthday, her parents announced their separation — shattering her world like a St. Lawrence ice floe under the warm spring wind.

The divorce judge granted custody of the child and the house to Louise. Gerald, expelled from the family home, was ordered to pay child support.

—*I grant your ex-wife a thousand dollars a month for your daughter’s maintenance*, said the judge.

—*Thank you, Your Honour!* Gerald replied, cheerfully. *If I ever get a job, I promise I’ll try to pitch in too.*

The courtroom burst into laughter — even the judge struggled to keep a straight face. He restored order only with threats to delay the divorces of the other couples lined up outside.



Without a father figure, Evangeline’s life soon took another turn. A new man entered the home : Andrew. He brought with him two sons — Charles, thirteen, and Albert, sixteen.

When her mother, beaming, told Evangeline that she would soon have “another daddy,” the girl offered a tired smile. She was used to the revolving door of adult affection. Of course, she would have preferred her own father — but children rarely get a say in these things. The sacrosanct freedom of the individual comes first.

At first, the idea of having two older brothers seemed appealing. Perhaps they would protect her from bullies. But she quickly discovered she had more to fear from them than from the playground. She confided in her school counsellor.

A meeting with Louise was arranged, but the mother brushed it off as childish imagination. She refused to jeopardize her “new family” for what she claimed were fabrications. And so, Evangeline’s file was placed in the drawer of institutional forgetfulness.



By the time she entered my classroom, Evangeline was a tall, slender girl — kind, diligent, and utterly shunned. Her unkempt hair and withdrawn demeanor made her an instant *pariah*. Her classmates avoided her like a contagious sorrow, pulling their desks away, leaving her alone in a sea of rejection.

Then came the announcement : her family was moving to Saskatchewan.

—*So, you're leaving us, I said kindly. Will you miss this school ?*

—*Um... yes... a little, she replied politely.*

—*Friday will be your last day. What would you like to do for your farewell ? A dance ? A picnic ? An art contest ? You decide.*

She paused, eyes glowing, then whispered :

—*A... a farewell dance, please.*





Friday arrived. Garlands of crepe paper adorned the walls, and a banner wished Evangeline happiness in her new life. Deep down, I was glad for her departure. Perhaps, in a new environment, she would be given a clean slate — a chance to form friendships without the shadow of past ridicule.

At one o'clock, the *sock hop* began. Evangeline had dressed up — red dress with white polka dots, hair brushed with care, eyes gleaming with timid hope. Yet, as the music began, she stood alone, just as she always had — watching, waiting, excluded.

—*For the first dance*, I announced brightly, *the girls invite the boys !*

It was a strategic choice, a hopeful one. But the moment passed. The popular girls swooped in, and Evangeline was left standing in her corner — hope fading, yet still clinging to some miracle.

I couldn't let it end like that.

I called Quentin, the class heartthrob, and whispered :

—*Five points toward participation and good behaviour for every dance with Evangeline. No one must know — not even her.*

—*Deal !* he grinned.

Then Morgan, the other charming rascal, received the same offer. With the promise of erasing detentions, both boys eagerly accepted.

From that moment, Evangeline never sat down. She danced, twirled, and laughed with flushed cheeks and radiant eyes. Her classmates watched in stunned silence. The girls, especially, were struck dumb — some jealous, others scornful. But Evangeline paid

## *Laura's aura*

them no mind. This was her moment. Her last afternoon here would not be one of isolation and rejection, but of grace.

As the final bell rang, she slipped me a folded note with a shy smile before vanishing from our lives.

Inside, written beneath a little heart:



*Sir, thank you for being so kind.*

Had she guessed the truth? I'll never know.



"On entering her parents' house, I saw that this Rose had become gorgeous, and this immediately made me very hesitant in my work of approach, for I feared that grace would make her more demanding, and that my advances would be met with a humiliating rebuff."

[Laura's aura]

**Guardian angels.**

This story was told to me one Saturday morning, during a lively gathering of Francophones and Francophiles in a modest restaurant in Surrey, a sprawling suburb nestled within Greater Vancouver. This vast conurbation, stretching 80 kilometers eastward and 40 kilometers north to south, is home to four million people and brushes up against the U.S. border. That border — demarcated since 1846 by a humble ditch barely fifty centimeters wide and deep— follows the 49th parallel, give or take.

Running alongside that ditch is *Avenue 0*, an oddly named road and the first East-West survey line drawn to formalize the boundary and structure the emerging townships.

From this unorthodox avenue, the streets unfurl northward — or rather, what was considered north in the late nineteenth century. Magnetic North, ever-shifting with the movements of the Earth's molten core, has since wandered. The streets now defy magnetic compasses.

It was English surveyors, having expelled the Indigenous peoples and Métis, who divided these lands for settlement. Waves of impoverished souls from Victorian England arrived, casualties of the Industrial Revolution, followed by refugees from the World Wars — each seeking peace in the vast, forgiving land of Canada.



But let us now return to our curious tale, having set the stage.

Just off Avenue 0, in a modest house facing south, lived Melanie, a spirited woman of ninety-four. She had moved into the home at the end of the Second World War, when its walls gleamed with fresh paint and youthful charm.

From her porch, she could peer across the border ditch and wave at her American neighbors. She loved listening to their stories — especially the soldiers', recently returned from Europe, who would share tales of valor, embellished or not. She was particularly fond of the legendary Sergeant Alvin York, who claimed to have killed 25 Germans and captured 130 prisoners with just a rifle and a pistol. Whether true or fanciful, Melanie delighted in retelling these tales.

As for illegal immigration, the Americans hardly worried about Canadians slipping into their so-called *jungle of freedom*. Canadians, well-rooted in their own relative peace, had little reason to flee south. On the contrary, political turmoil, draconian laws, and wars — often instigated by Wall Street's military-industrial interests — sent waves of Americans fleeing north, to Canada.

Conscientious objectors, deserters, draft dodgers, and fugitives evading the electric chair found refuge in Canada. Canadian law, after all, forbade extradition to countries with capital punishment. Our American neighbors even nicknamed our penitentiaries "*Cadillac Jails*." That said it all.

Melanie remembered the old man who had once lived across the ditch, in a ramshackle cottage, before being taken away in an old-fashioned black Cadillac — the kind used as hearses.

That man had fought in the Ardennes, where Nazis dressed in American uniforms had caught U.S. troops by surprise. Upon his return, his house was festooned with flags and cockades. The border town of Blaine hailed him as a local hero. But when a Russian neighbor dared suggest that it was mainly the Russian army

—not the Americans— that had broken Hitler's back, outrage erupted. Death threats followed. He had to leave town in a hurry.

—*Would you like a beer, Melanie ?* asked Marcus, one of three men smoking beside her.

She shook her head :

—*No, thanks.*

She knew Marcus, Jonathan, and Albert well. Ten years earlier, they had saved her life.



That was in 1989. Far away, the Berlin Wall was crumbling beneath the hammers of tourists eager to pocket fragments of history. The Cold War's concrete symbol was falling, even as human folly remained intact. That year, the Soviet Union pulled out of Afghanistan after nine futile years and two million deaths, including 15,000 Russians. The American-armed Mujahideen would soon turn those very weapons against the West.

Mr. Bush Senior was ascending to the U.S. presidency, preparing a war under the guise of Justice, but aimed squarely at Iraq's oil. His son, Bush Junior, would later stage a second Iraq War, dragging Afghanistan back into bloodshed. The former conflict claimed 700,000 lives ; the latter, 60,000. Always, it was the poor who bled.

As Charles James Fox warned in 1781 : “*when war promises glory without taxation, the motives go unexamined, and distant bloodshed causes but a flicker of sorrow.*” War, after all, profits the few — never the combatants.



When her husband died, Melanie remained alone in her large, aging home. Almost completely deaf, she kept up with the world via television subtitles. She lived without fear; what could she possibly offer to thieves or fugitives ? She made a point of proclaiming her poverty so loudly and so often that Social Services eventually investigated — only to conclude she needed no assistance.

Runaways and criminals crossed into Canada to escape the rigor of US Justice. Melanie wasn't afraid of them either. Most fled toward densely populated areas, far from quiet Avenue 0. She knew no one would bother her.

Yet, the belief in one's invulnerability is often the first misstep.



One warm summer evening, as the sun dipped behind Vancouver Island, Melanie sat outside breathing in the dusk. Two men passed by :

—*Good evening*, one called out, his tone unnervingly cheerful.

—*Good evening*, she replied, uncertain of what the passer-by had said ; a chill running down her spine.

Once they were out of sight, Melanie rose and went inside. Dusk faded into night. She limped over to check the lock, then settled in front of the television, pushing back sleep as the elderly often do — sleep, after all, is a rehearsal for death.

She must have dozed off. A sudden crash of breaking glass snapped her awake. The television flickered blue across her face. It wasn't a sound from the screen — a preacher was still begging for donations while proclaiming Armageddon.

*Laura's aura*

Then came the real terror. The front door burst open. Two men stormed in, shouting :

—*Don't move or you're dead! Where's your husband? Where's your money ?*

Melanie screamed.

—*No need to yell ! No one will hear. If you don't have a man, that's better. We'd've had to kill him too !*

—*What do you want ?* she gasped.

—*Where's the cash ?*

—*I don't have any ! I live on Welfare. My purse is there. There's ten dollars in it, maybe.*

One grabbed the bag.

—*Ten bucks ? Where's the stash ?*

—*I wish I had one.*

A slap landed hard across her cheek. She cried out.

—*Shut up ! Give us the money or you'll end the night in hell !*

Another blow, a yank of her hair. She moaned in pain.

—*I have osteoarthritis ! You're hurting me !*

Then, suddenly, the basement door slammed open. A group of people poured in, armed with baseball bats and iron bars. They pounced on the thieves with brutal precision.

Melanie cowered in terror until one of them leaned over :

—*Don't be afraid, Melanie. We're your neighbors — we're here to help."*

—*Thank God ! Call the police!* another cried. *These thugs belong in jail !*

## *Laura's aura*

Within minutes, the Mounties arrived. The attackers were arrested. An ambulance rushed Melanie to the hospital. Eight days later, she returned home, welcomed by her three unlikely saviors.

She invited them to dinner. They insisted on cooking hot dogs and fries.

Later, curiosity got the better of her :

*—How did you happen to be there, in my house, at that very moment ?*

They looked down, sheepish.

*—It's... embarrassing.*

*—Oh ? Why ?*

*—We've been living in your basement. Illegally. For three years.*

*—In my basement ?*

*—Yes... And that's how we were there to save your life.*

She was stunned. She questioned them endlessly. They answered every inquiry with humility.

*—And now ? one asked. Will you forgive us — or turn us in ?*

She paused, then smiled.

*—I won't turn you in. In fact, I'm inviting you to live upstairs with me. We'll share the chores. And the meals. And if trouble comes again — you'll be here.*



And so, they lived together —Melanie and her three guardians— in a curious harmony of friendship, gratitude, and peace. When old age stole her strength, they cared for her like sons for a mother, knowing her passing would return them to the shadows, to homelessness.



### *Laura's aura*

Eventually, death came. It always does.

They mourned as if they'd lost family. A few days after the funeral, a solicitor summoned them.

According to Melanie's final wishes, the house now belonged to the three of them.

No longer tramps. No longer afraid.

They were home.

"When cruel old age handicapped Melanie even more, it was the three vagabonds who took care of her with maternal attention." [Guardian Angels]



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## **The leases**

Have you ever noticed how, in our Canadian cities, the wealthiest —and the poorest— seem increasingly determined to cluster in separate enclaves, forming modern-day ghettos of privilege or despair?

In Greater Vancouver, the affluent are drawn, almost magnetically, to neighborhoods with Celtic-sounding names like Shaughnessy or Kerrisdale — names that evoke either the golden warmth of a fine Cognac or the windswept romance of Highland glens.

In these hallowed zones, property prices hover like stratus clouds at dizzying altitudes. The residents, with faux modesty, declare incomes exceeding a million dollars a year —well aware that the CRA (Canada Revenue Agency) listens keenly, its quiver brimming with arrows for the crafty taxpayer.

Yet some rogue banks —those modern *temples of Mammon*— help these citizens slip past the hounds of the CRA. With reverence only for the almighty dollar, they open secret accounts in one of fifteen British tax havens, cheating Justice and stealing public revenues with impunity.

Canadians, who take civic duty seriously, often denounce these cheats, leading to a remarkable statistic: nearly 80% of tax audits for fraud are initiated by anonymous citizen tips.

In these affluent sanctuaries where milk and honey (and suspicious amounts of wealth) flow freely, art galleries proliferate, often serving as discreet laundromats for money from scams and

frauds. Banks are as common as coffee shops, sniffing out gold and silver like sharks scenting blood. And churches —oh, the churches!— of every creed and denomination also bloom.

The men of God —pastors, imams, rabbis, monks, sorcerers, and even the last medicine-man— have long understood that if one wishes to live without toil or sweat, it is wise to align oneself with those wealthy souls who seek heaven after wringing every drop from the Earth.



It was a winter evening — one of those damp, bone-deep cold nights that shows no mercy to the homeless. Through the filmy tulle curtains and Venetian blinds of great bay windows, you could glimpse the serene lives of the privileged, warm in their plush interiors. These translucent curtains, more than mere decor, seemed designed to taunt the poor with visions of lives they would never live.

I was sitting on a public bench in one such god-blessed neighborhood, quietly admiring the mansions around me, cathedrals of opulence, each vying with the next in beauty and grandeur. A disheveled man passed by, enveloped in an invisible fog of stale odor, pushing a battered Safeway cart with a shrieking wheel. He stopped, sat beside me, and sighed heavily before bracing himself for the next mile in his journey to nowhere. He must have noticed my gaze lingering on one house across the street — a somewhat older residence, less grand than its neighbours, but with lines that whispered faded nobility. In my mind, it resembled an old duchess from the imperial era, come to sip tea with the *nouveau-riche* titans of tech.

—*I used to own that house*, said the man, his voice hoarse from years of cheap booze and harsher truths. *Would you believe it, sir ?*

*Laura's aura*

I turned to him, startled not just by the claim but by the articulate phrasing.

*—I was rich once — or at least, I wore the mask of wealth convincingly. I knew how to cradle a Saint-Amour in my mouth like it was spun silk.*

My confused expression prompted his explanation.

*—Saint-Amour, sir — it's a Beaujolais. A lovely French wine. I say this in case you mistake me for a libertine... or worse.*

I chuckled.

*—A necessary clarification.*

The man smiled wryly, then continued:

*—Every profession has its paradoxes. Soldiers kill to earn a living. Police use violence to fight violence. Lawyers accuse the innocent to acquit the guilty — and do so with clear conscience. Priests promise eternal life... through death. Philosophers say the poor are richer than millionaires — but never seek poverty themselves. Shopkeepers say you save money by spending it. Politicians swear to purge corruption — then bathe in it.*

*—You sound more like a philosopher than a beggar.*

*—Flattered, sir. But I still depend on the charity of those who toil. Begging is illegal here—but thank God, charity is not. Otherwise, I'd starve. Even Plato and Aristotle had slaves to spare their minds from manual labor. That's why neither ever truly condemned slavery.*

I studied him more carefully, both intrigued and disturbed. He seemed to imply that the working poor were slaves, while he, in his philosophical homelessness, had found a kind of liberation.

*—Life only begins to make sense near the end, he continued. I was born poor in the Eastern Townships. My ancestors were Americans,*

*expelled by the Irish and Scottish revolutionaries after the Thirteen Colonies revolted. After WWII, I was 'recruited' by the CIA — more accurately, abducted for experimentation. The infamous MK-Ultra program. Montreal's McGill University played a major role. I was subjected to drugs, shocks, hypnosis... Nearly lost my mind. But I survived—and even thrived. I became a millionaire. Not a billionaire, true—but still... comfortable."*

*—And what ruined you ? I asked, already dreading the answer.*

*—Two catastrophes. The first — a swindle. I rented out my house—you see it ? —for \$7,000 a month while I traveled the world on a luxury cruise. The tenant was a fraud. He sublet the place, collected deposits from multiple victims, then vanished. When I returned, angry tenants and their lawyers demanded compensation. The court placed a judicial lien on my house. I had to pay nearly half a million dollars in damages and legal fees.*

*—Incredible, I murmured.*

*—But the worst came later. I hit a man with my car. A lawyer, of course. He became permanently disabled. The courts awarded him a pension of \$300,000 a year — based on my assets, not my insurance. I only had a million in liability coverage. They seized everything — my house, my savings, even my furniture. All gone.*

*He looked at me, eyes hollow yet defiant.*

*—You asked earlier about slaves. What do you call a man who must spend his life working to support another, while owning nothing himself ? That's what I became. A slave in reverse. And when the debt grew so large I could no longer pretend to chip away at it — I left. I let the debt devour my life. I became... what you see.*



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### **The wardrobe of jealousies.**

One fresh morning in May, I opened my bedroom window and lay back on the bed, letting the crisp air drift over me. Outside, the birds were singing cheerfully, busy building their nests. British Columbia's long, rainy winter was finally over.

I had been enjoying this calm for a few minutes when faint whispers reached my ears. At first, I couldn't tell where they came from. They seemed to emanate from the large wardrobe that took up an entire wall of my room. I listened intently. Bits of sentences began to emerge.

—*Please... like this... very big...*

Startled —and even a little afraid— I pressed my ear against the slatted closet doors, those wooden planchettes we call *jealousies*. The voices became clearer.

—*Wow, sighed one voice. This coat is so heavy. My shoulders ache. I only managed to fall asleep around two in the morning, exhausted.*

—*Oh, how I pity you, another replied in a mocking tone. You, wire hangers, are so delicate. You should only carry blouses !*

—*Please don't make fun of us, whimpered a thinner voice. Just because you're made of varnished wood doesn't mean you have the right to despise us. We're already weak... disposable. People throw us away after a few uses !*

The speaker was a trembling wire hanger, standing before a majestic wooden one draped in an elegant evening gown.

—*Poor, pitiful creature*, replied the wooden hanger smugly, making its dress rustle with self-importance. *Clearly Destiny has smiled on us, granting us the nobility of polished and varnished wood!*

The humble lament of the wire hanger seemed to inflate the varnished ones with pride. But it sparked a murmur of discontent among the other wires.

—*There's no reason*, muttered one resentfully, *to feel inferior to varnished wood. Iron is no less noble ! And you varnished snobs — once your shiny coat chips away, we see you're not so special underneath.*

—*Quiet, all of you !* a deep voice boomed suddenly — it was a heavy raincoat.

—*I just want to say*, added a calmer wire, *that arrogance is no better than false modesty. We do not grow taller by belittling the humble.*

The debate resumed, livelier than ever. To restore order, I finally shouted toward the closet :

—*Silence in there !*

Instant calm. Just as I began to relish the peace, my ten-year-old sister Caroline poked her head in.

—*Why are you yelling, Jacques ? There's no one here !*

—*Ah... uh... no reason !*

—*Who were you talking to ?*

—*To... to the crows outside ! They're keeping me up !*

The wire and wood hangers, thoroughly frightened, didn't dare speak again for months.



## *Laura's aura*

December arrived at last, and Christmas made me forget all about that strange episode.

On Christmas Eve, our house overflowed with family and joy. Laughter, singing, and glowing faces filled every room. Uncle Paul and Aunt Jeanne had come from afar, and it was my first time meeting them.

Even our cousins from Vernon were there —seven boys and four girls, including the beautiful Geneviève. I don't know why, but I couldn't bring myself to meet her eyes.

Toward the end of the evening, my cousin Sylvain came running in, yelling:

—*Santa Claus ! Santa Claus is here ! He's in the living room !*

No sooner had he shouted than a big Santa appeared in his red coat, hauling a massive sack on his back. My cousin Andrew leaned toward me, smirking.

—*It's my brother John. Don't tell anyone !*

Santa began distributing gifts with great ceremony.

—*For Valérie*, he announced, handing me a red package.

—*She's asleep on your bed*, said Aunt Jeanne. *She got tired ; I tucked her in.*

—*I'll go put her gift next to her*, I offered.

I crept into my room, dimly lit by the hallway light, and gently placed the gift beside Valérie, who lay curled across the bed. She'd be so delighted in the morning.

As I turned to leave, I heard familiar whispers coming from behind the closet doors.

“*Oh! I forgot all about them !*”



I froze and listened. The hangers were deep in conversation. The celebration had reached even them: the wooden ones wore splendid fur coats, silver fox trims, white mink collars — unreal elegance. Even the wire hangers had joined the fun, dressed in mo-hair sweaters, oriental shirts, and bright children's jackets.

—*What a Christmas !* whispered one wire hanger. *Look how well we're dressed !*

—*It's the first time we all get to live out our dreams,* sighed another, eyeing a varnished hanger in a curly wool pullover.

—*Hey ! Flirting tonight?* teased a red velvet dress.

—*Why not ? It's not every day we're this fashionable !* the hanger replied, laughing.

Suddenly, a hush fell. All eyes turned to a shadowed corner. The jalousie doors were ajar, and a shaft of hallway light cut across the closet's interior. I hid in the shadows and watched.

There, alone, hung a wire hanger in a torn T-shirt and soiled jeans, slumped in sadness.

—*You laugh and celebrate... but I've been forgotten,* it whispered. *What a miserable Christmas.*

—Don't be such a downer, scolded a varnished hanger. You're the one who chose to hide in the corner !

—*Come on, look at yourself,* said another wire hanger, puffing out its angora sweater. *No wonder you weren't chosen — you don't even have the strength to carry two shirts !*

—*That's not true,* the sad hanger protested. *I may look weak, but I'm resilient. And you — you're made of the same wire I am ! Don't act superior just because you got lucky tonight !*

—*Face the truth,* sneered the angora-clad one. *You're a loser. A nobody. You get what you deserve.*

My heart sank. I forgot all about the gift and my sleeping sister. I had to help this poor, forgotten hanger. Then — an idea ! I would give it my brand-new sweater, the one I'd left draped over the chair in the dining room. That would make its Christmas, too.

But just then, Santa Claus walked into the room. He turned on the light and began to peel off his red coat. Opening the closet wide, he asked :

—*There's no hanger left ?*

—*Yes, I said, smiling. In the corner on the right — there's one with just a T-shirt and jeans.*

My brother John took it gently, hung Santa's costume on it, and placed it back in the closet.

—*I'll stay here for a few minutes, I told him. See you soon !*

—*What are you doing in the dark ?*

—*I'll explain in five minutes. Go ahead !*

Once calm and darkness returned, I peered into the closet again. My heart filled with joy.

Every hanger had turned toward the once-forgotten wire hanger, now proudly holding Santa's magnificent suit. It stood tall, radiant with pride.

And from all corners of the closet, voices rose in chorus :

*“Long live Santa Claus! Long live our Father Christmas!*

*Long live our Santa Claus!”*



## *Laura's aura*

"I apply my ear all against the doors made of planchettes spaced apart from each other, which are called jealousies, and I can finally overhear a whole conversation." [The wardrobe of jealousies]



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## **Strange friendship**

(Christmas Tale)

If you've never been terrified by a snowstorm, come visit Dawson Creek during one of its seven winter months.

There, blizzards rage with theatrical fury. The wind and snow howl like a pack of wolves set loose, and icy flakes find their way into every crack and crevice — like Saharan sand driven by the sirocco.

If you're ever caught in one of those storms, you'll lose your bearings even on the most familiar path, wandering like a blind man. May Heaven help the poor soul who needs a doctor at such a moment ! He will be left to fate — unless... But let me say no more. Instead, listen to the extraordinary adventure that befell a child from this icy land.



That winter was particularly harsh. Marie-Justine, a nine-year-old girl, lived alone with her father on an isolated farm, deep in the vast Boreal Forest.

As January neared and the snow kept falling, she built a large snowman in the clearing before their home. She gave him a carrot nose, a red-and-white scarf, and an old grey felt hat. His round face, carefully shaped, looked so lifelike that she gave him a name : Leon — after her grandfather, and also because it was Noël, Christmas, spelled backwards.

After each snowfall, Marie-Justine would rush outside to brush the snow from Leon's shoulders, uncovering his face. She'd

polish his black eyes until they gleamed, place the wooden pipe back in his smiling mouth, and whisper, “*You're my best friend, my big snowman,*” before hurrying back inside for a warm cup of milk.

She adored him. She imagined that he must feel the cold just as she did, and one day asked her father if they could bring him indoors.

—*No, Marie-Justine,* her father chuckled. *If we warm him up, he'll melt.*

She didn't argue — but she wasn't convinced. Surely such a handsome gentleman wouldn't melt like ordinary snow.

To warm him a little, she decided to share her milk with him. Just a spoonful. And she thought —she was sure— his face smiled faintly in thanks. From then on, each morning after her father left for his work as a lumberjack, she brought Leon a few drops of hot milk. Her own milk tasted better when it was shared.



But one evening, just days before the end of February, her father returned from the forest limping badly, a rough bandage wrapped around his leg. He had struck himself with his axe.

The next morning, the wound was inflamed. He could no longer walk. Marie-Justine rose early to milk the cow, handed her father a steaming cup, and brought a few drops to her snowman. Then she boiled water to clean the wound. Her father, pale and feverish, guided her in a trembling voice. She followed his instructions with devotion, proud to help.

But the next day, her father's condition worsened.

—*We need a doctor, Marie-Justine,* he said weakly. *This is serious... too serious.*

By evening, he was delirious. Terrified, Marie-Justine knelt at the frosted window and prayed fervently. Outside, in the white dusk, she could see Leon standing still, watching her through the storm with his somber coal-black eyes. After a long while, she rose and made a decision.

She would go for help. There were no telephones.

The nearest village was ten kilometers away. She bundled herself up, opened the door, and stepped out onto the snowy trail. The sky was grey. The wind had teeth. She had gone scarcely three kilometers when the blizzard struck. The world vanished. She could no longer see her feet. She turned back, her little heart pounding with fear. After what seemed like hours, she stumbled into the clearing, nearly collapsing in front of Leon.

The storm roared all night. The wind slammed against the walls, shook the roof. Marie-Justine fed the last logs into the fire and climbed into bed, shivering. Her body ached. She had caught a fever. Her father lay still, his breathing shallow. Death hovered in the rafters.



By morning, the fire had died. The storm still raged, and the cold inside the house was unbearable. Marie-Justine could no longer feel her fingers. Her strength was gone. Her father's breath had nearly stopped. She closed her eyes. They were going to die.

Suddenly—*knocks on the door*. A voice, muffled by the storm, called out:

—Marc Lupien ! Marie-Justine ! Are you there ?

She couldn't answer. Her lips, like her limbs, were frozen.

—Marc Lupien ! Marie-Justine ! It's Dr. Rioux !

The name *Doctor* echoed somewhere inside her dulled mind. But she thought it was too late. She was already drifting into unconsciousness.

Then—a crash! The door burst open. A great black shadow knelt beside her, brushing snow from its face. A man's voice murmured urgently, his hands warm on her face. He gave her an injection. Another. He moved to her father, gave him medicine, wrapped them both in blankets. Slowly, the house filled with warmth. Life began to return.

Hours passed. Marie-Justine awoke fully at last.

—Marie-Justine, it's a miracle, said the doctor. A few more minutes and you would both have perished.

—But... who told you ? she whispered. Who came for you ?

The doctor frowned.

—I don't know. Yesterday night, the storm was fierce. I was reading by the fireplace when I heard a great hoarse voice outside my window shouting : *Doctor! Come quickly! Marie-Justine Lupien is going to die...*

—But... who was it ?

—I rushed out. No one was there. The wind was so strong I couldn't even stand upright. I waited until it calmed, then came with my sleigh.

—But... no one knew, said Marie-Justine. No one knew we were sick !

—Are you sure?

—Yes. Absolutely sure.

The doctor shook his head.

—Well. I've never believed in ghosts, Marie-Justine.

*Laura's aura*

But Marie-Justine didn't answer. A strange idea had just struck her. She rose quietly, walked to the window, and scraped away the frost with her fingernails.

Out in the clearing stood her snowman, still facing the little wooden house.

But now, in Leon's glistening black eyes, she thought she saw... the trace of a smile.



Marie-Justine and Leon



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## **The visit**

(Christmas Tale)

When I opened my eyes, the world was swallowed in darkness. I couldn't even make out the shadows that shifted faintly around me, like silent ghosts drifting through the room. For a few long seconds, my mind hovered somewhere outside my body, still drugged by sleep, as if it were reluctant to re-enter the flesh.

My thoughts came back in fragments, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle slowly falling into place. Bit by bit, the blurred outline of the evening began to reassemble. It was Christmas night. My parents had left me in bed — I hadn't wanted to go to church with them.

I was only six. For months, they'd promised that this year, finally, I'd be allowed to attend midnight mass. I was proud — elated, even.

Dad had said :

*—You're a big boy now, Popaul. This year you're coming with us. You'll hear the carols, see the candles glowing in the dark. Everyone's so happy, thinking about the presents waiting under the tree... the turkey with chestnuts, the steaming tourtières...*

Until then, they had always left me with a babysitter — a girl barely older than a child herself, who must have needed money badly enough to give up her own Christmas Eve, I thought. But this year was different. I was going to church like the grown-ups.

## *Laura's aura*

Wanting to be fresh and ready for the big night, I had crawled into bed at 9:00 p.m. and set my little alarm clock for eleven.

But when the moment came, I couldn't summon the slightest strength. I heard my mother's voice, gentle and coaxing, pulling me back from the depths:

*—Come on, Popaul, time to get up ! If we don't leave now, we won't get a seat !*

I groaned, my voice thick with sleep.

*—I'm tired, Mom... I want to stay in bed...*

*—What ? You don't want to come anymore ?*

*—No... maybe next Christmas...*

They stood in silence, stunned.

*—What do we do now ? We can't find a sitter at this hour.*

*—I'll stay,* my father offered, though I heard the reluctance in his voice, as though it came from far away.

*—No, it's fine,* my mother said. *Popaul's six now. He's sleeping deeply. He won't wake up. We'll only be gone an hour or two...*

They meant no harm. They were just twenty-five — still young, perhaps too young. I was the unexpected result of a romantic experiment between two reckless teenagers. At first, the idea of a baby had thrilled them. It was like playing house with a living doll. But by morning, the illusion had worn thin. Reality sobered them.

And that's how they left me alone, never suspecting the consequences that could have descended like a thunderclap onto their heads —and hearts— had anything happened. To be fair, my dear parents were only twenty-five. I had arrived uninvited, the result of a youthful folly between teenagers. They played at being

parents for a day, but by the next morning, the novelty had worn off. Thankfully, my grandmother had stepped in. I often thought I should've been their younger brother, not their child.

They must have tiptoed out. I didn't hear a sound.



Fifteen minutes later, a shrill ringing tore through the silence of the night, yanking me from my dreams. The phone. My eyes snapped open to pitch-black nothingness. I blinked once, twice — still no light, no shape. I thought maybe my eyelids hadn't opened properly. I blinked harder. The blackness remained.

The ringing went on — piercing, insistent, each tone a small dagger in my ear. It clawed at my nerves. It sounded ten times louder in the stillness of night. My hair stood on end. I was too afraid to get up, too terrified to walk barefoot through the dark. Mice ?

*“Why weren't they answering ?”*

*“Oh, right. They were at church.”*

The phone sounded louder at night, I thought. Somehow crueler.

I was too frightened to leave the bed, too terrified to plant my bare feet on the floor. Who knew what might be lurking ? Mice. At that age, I was convinced they'd nibble at my toes like little wedges of cheese if I so much as dared move.



Outside, a wind-jostled streetlamp sent quivering shadows into my room. After what felt like an eternity, the phone finally stopped. Silence returned—a sweet, brief reprieve.

I was just about to slip back into sleep when I heard it: a key turning in a lock. Soft, deliberate. I raised my head. The sound

came from the back door, the one that opened onto the garden. Someone was fumbling with the key... then slowly turning it.

*“Maybe it was Mom and Dad ?”*

No. Something told me it wasn't them. The door opened, mewling softly like our cat Mistigri, then closed with a hush. I could hear everything, see with my ears.

Then, suddenly, light ! The faint frame of my door glowed. Someone had turned on a flashlight. Boots thudded on the floorboards: *flac! flac! flac!* A rustling of heavy fabric followed: *frou! frou! frou!*

*—It must be Santa Claus ! I thought. He's come to deliver the presents! I'll get to see him for real ! I'll tell the boys at school — they'll never believe me!*

I was filled with joy. No fear. None at all. I almost leapt out of bed to hug him... until I remembered what my mother had told me :

*—Popaul, Santa never comes if the children are awake. He doesn't like being seen.*

*—Why?*

*—I don't know. He must have his reasons.*

From my bed, I could see the whole hallway. The flashlight beam danced like a giant butterfly across the walls, ceiling, and floor. The silhouette moved closer. Heavy boots. A toque atop a broad, dark figure. The man cupped his hand over the beam, letting only a thin ray escape between his fingers. I could see the pale ring of the bulb shining through his skin.

*—Santa is so careful! I thought, beaming. He doesn't want to wake me up!*

## *Laura's aura*

He entered the living room, where the tree stood with stockings hung. I heard no rustling of gifts. Curious, I crept out of bed and slipped under it.

*"He mustn't know I'm awake! Otherwise, he might take the presents back!"*

A moment later, the boots returned. *Flac! flac! flac!* The man turned into my bedroom. He stood right by my bed, so close I could touch his boots.

*"Wait... no reindeer? No sleigh? Just boots? Dirty, slushy ones? If Mom saw this mess, she'd scream!"*

But I made excuses for him. He was busy. He had a schedule. He couldn't take off his boots in every house, after all.

The man walked down the hall and entered my parents' room. Drawers opened. Rummaging. Soft clinks.

"He's leaving gifts for Mom and Dad too... in the drawers, to surprise them! Maybe jewelry?"

I waited. And then the figure returned, faster this time. The front door whispered open, then clicked shut. The key turned again.

Gone !

Silence fell, heavy as snow. And then a chill ran down my spine.

*"What if there's a mouse... hiding in my room?"*

I sprang from under the bed and dove under the covers. Knees to chin. Heart pounding.

*"Brrrrrouououou... What a fright I've had!"*

Sleep was impossible. Minutes passed.

Then I heard it : laughter. The sound of a car. My parents were home.

## *Laura's aura*

I ran out to meet them.

*—I saw Santa Claus ! I saw him! He just left !*

*—Oh, that's wonderful, my father laughed, scooping me up. What did he say to you ?*

*—Nothing ! He came to the living room, I said, squirming free and diving toward my stocking. And he left presents for you too — in your dresser drawers !*

My parents stared at me. Then they stared at the floor. Their eyes widened in horror at the trail of melted snow and grime across the rug.

They never left me home alone again.

As for the key they'd always hidden beneath a loose brick behind the garden shed — they found a new hiding place.



"Santa's shadow, covered with a thick fur coat, appeared at the end of the hallway. A cap gave a pointed shape to the black mass.

*Laura's aura*

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As Louis Ferdinand Céline said, most people only die at the last moment. Others start twenty years early; they are the wretched of the earth. Such was the fate of the narrator of this book, who became a quadriplegic long before his tragic departure from this world. Paradoxically, this old man's memory remains a source of enrichment for those who know how to read between the lines, an invigorating experience. Feeling that the programmed obsolescence of his existence, which had already destroyed the motor faculties of his body, was beginning to ravage his mind and the memories of his life, the narrator set out to revisit his distant past, to dust off the already infected store rooms of his life, to unearth some of the more salient memories.

